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THE BRAZOS TIGERS; or, The MINUTE-MEN of FORT BELKNAP.

A TALE OF SPORT AND PERIL IN TEXAS.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall,

AUTHOR OF "DIAMOND DICK," "THE LONE STAR GAMBLER," "THE TERRIBLE TONKAWAY," "KIT CARSON," "BIG FOOT WALLACE," ETC., ETC.



THE DUEL IN THE SINK-HOLE.

The Brazos Tigers;

OR,

The Minute Men of Fort Belknap.

A Tale of Sport and Peril in Texas.

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AUTHOR OF "BIG FOOT WALLACE," "DIAMOND
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CHAPTER I.

THE LONE STAR.

FORT BELKNAP, situated in Young county, Texas, to the north of Camp Cooper, was, thirty years ago, a Government military station, with extensive stone buildings, consisting of a hospital, commissary store-house, ordnance department, barracks, etc., but it was abandoned soon after these buildings had been erected, leaving the dark, gloomy, prison-like structures standing amid a number of scattered, insignificant dwellings that appeared like dog-kennels in comparison.

The old St. Louis and Santa Fe stage line led through the town south to the Horse Head crossing of the Rio Pecos, and thence up the river to El Paso, connecting with the San Antonio and San Diego line of stages, then run by George Giddings, the Holliday of the Southwest.

Fort Belknap stands upon an earth bluff or hill, within a mile of the Rio Brazos, which glides smooth and blue, and almost as salt as the sea, to the southeast of the town.

Just at the base of the bluff, between the town and the river, is a large, limpid spring of excellent water, which, in the olden time, was the only source of supply for the town in the way of "Adam's ale."

The Government wagon-road, which extends north to Fort Cobb in the Indian Nation, goes past this spring, and thence by ford over the Brazos, on southwest to Camp Colorado and Santa Ana's Peak, and from thence to San Antonio.

There was not a single dwelling on the river, and to the north, among the oak openings, those who had established ranches had been forced to abandon them, or were killed and mutilated by Comanches before they were wise enough to move within the precincts of the town.

Even there they were not safe, for the Comanche war-parties several times charged through the principal street at headlong speed, their war-cries and deadly arrows filling the air with horror, terror and death.

In those days the young lads of the town attended school with revolvers and bowie-knives buckled around their waists, and those among them who were so favored as to survive their academic career, are now among the most expert handlers of these arms on the American continent.

Many of them are now engaged in driving the immense herds of cattle and horses from Texas north, through the Indian Nation, to the great stock markets. And, let me here say, that these so-called cowboys have been greatly traduced by the American press; for, as a class, they are noble, brave and fearless men, liberal to a fault, tender-hearted, and devoted to each other. In fact, few men can be found, who lead a roaming life in Nature's gardens, who will not divide their little all with any one who is in need. Fewer still would desert a friend, or take advantage of an enemy.

If, when they reach a town, they are poisoned with "prussic acid bug juice" until they become insane, and use the weapons they are obliged to carry, too freely—more in sport than otherwise—it is the fault of the town that permits the sale of the vile poison, more than of the poor fellows, whose protracted privation and continuous watchfulness by day and night, naturally cause them to take advantage of a day's rest to have a free and easy "jam-boree."

Many of the sons of the wealthiest stock-raisers of Texas, who can command millions, take to the "drive," for the excitement of it, or to see the country.

But, to return to Fort Belknap. We will add, in the way of describing the town and its drawbacks, that, had it not been a military post, the settlers would have been few indeed;

for there was not a single habitation, except the lodges of the Kioways and the Comanches, between this isolated village and the vast barren waste, called Llano Estacado, or, in English, the Staked Plains.

This name originated in the fact that the most direct route over this Great American Desert was marked in the olden time by Spanish explorers, by driving a stake into the sands at the end of each mile; this route being ninety miles without a drop of water, or a spear of grass, and lined with skeletons of oxen, horses, mules, and human beings.

There can be no doubt in regard to this depressed desert having, at one time, been an inland sea—proofs of this, in the way of marine shells, being scattered over the ground at all points. On the east of this vast plain roamed the Comanche, Kioway, and Apache; on the west, branches of the Apaches, Utes, Navajos, and other tribes of less number and note.

Beyond the oak openings, west and north of Fort Belknap, and which extended but a short distance, there was no timber except the narrow strips that bordered each side of the streams; and, even on the rivers, which were all salt or extremely brackish, and unfit for use, in many long stretches there was not even a bush to mark the water-course. This is the case for a long distance at Red river, where this stream forms the boundary-line between Texas and the Indian Nation.

The sparse population of Fort Belknap had depended mostly upon the trade of the boys in blue for subsistence; stock-raising, although it was the only business engaged in, being unprofitable, for the reason that the herds were continually being killed, or driven away by the red-skins.

Many of the citizens would have removed and located near Fredericksburg had they not been without the money necessary to a removal. As things were, they were "anchored," and must wait for the opening up of the country to the west, and this was not likely to draw even squatters to that unsettled and almost unknown region.

Just one year previous to the abandonment of Fort Belknap, by the Government, as a military post, a man some forty years of age, and with a careworn look, stepped out from the St. Louis stage and assisted a most beautiful girl to alight. Then both stood upon the board platform, opposite the dwelling, store and post-office combined, until several large trunks had been taken from the hind "boot."

There was but one place in the town at which travelers could be accommodated. This was but one story in height, and with a high pitched roof, having but two chambers in the attic. The pair of strangers, being directed by the postmaster, went to this "hotel," and engaged these two rooms. The rough-garbed citizens, with hands in pockets, chewed their tobacco with more vim than ordinary, and looked on in silent curiosity.

The arrival of the stage made a slight break in the humdrum life of the town, but it was seldom that it brought a passenger, and consequently all were agog to know what had brought such a well-dressed pair to the burg. The beauty of the girl was especially noticeable, as she tripped lightly along, evidently relieved at being once more free from the long and tedious confinement of the stage-coach journey.

But the "citz" were more surprised, and agreeably, when, after supper, in the soft bazy eve, this beautiful girl, with her bright blue eyes, and long, wavy, light-brown hair that flowed free, and rosy, velvety cheeks, tripped gracefully through their streets toward the Post-office; stopping, as she returned, to kiss each little child that toddled past, and with a smile and kind word for all.

To the postmaster she confided the fact that her escort was her father, and that they had come from far-away Boston intending to settle here, and lead a quiet life, where the air was bracing and game was abundant—her father being an invalid, whom the physicians had ordered to this dry and genial clime.

We will be more explicit, however, and state that the stranger, Henry Stearns, was a Boston lawyer, who had, through untiring energy and close application to business, accumulated a handsome fortune, but, in so doing, had ruined his health forever. His wife had died when their daughter, an only child, was but five years of age; and as he had worshiped her in life, so ever since he had revered her memory.

It is almost needless to say that he loved,

most devotedly and passionately, his lovely and sprightly daughter Stella, for this was the case with all whom she met.

Stella Stearns, for some weeks, ran wild about Fort Belknap, up and down the Brazos, at the cool spring, and through the shades of the post oaks, quite regardless of the warnings of the old residents, laughing at their "awful stories," as she called them, and declaring that she would like, above all things, to see a war-painted Comanche.

However, it was seldom that Stella strayed far from the town that sharp, anxious, watchful eyes were not on the lookout for any danger that might beset her path; for all had come to regard her as the pride of the town, in which she queened it right royally, but lovingly.

The minute-men of Fort Belknap, organized after the abandonment of the place as a station for troops, were a band of heroes well used to frontier life and Indian warfare; and they often ventured out on the plains to the west to hunt buffaloes, the meat of which they transported to town on pack-mules, and distributed equally, free of charge.

Associated with Mr. Stearns in Boston had been a gentleman named Chase, who had a son named Charles. This youth, three years Stella's senior, had been her almost constant companion and escort since her childhood. When her father was ordered South by his physicians, and Stella was fully resolved to accompany him, Charles Chase, in his grief and concern, confessed to the young girl the affection he had ever felt for her, and urged her to become his wife; but, with a peal of laughter which he could see was assumed, she patted his cheek, and bade him wait until both had seen more of the world, and had gained in years and experience.

From her manner and words Charles knew that Stella loved him, and he resolved to follow his Lone Star to the Lone Star State, if he could get the consent of his father. He also induced two of his schoolmates, whose parents desired them to travel South for their health, to join him.

According to promise, Stella wrote to Charles on the very day of her arrival at Fort Belknap; and, in one month from that day, the young man sailed from Boston, with his two friends, for the port of Indianola, in Matagorda Bay, having written Stella of his intentions.

It was just two months after the arrival of Mr. Stearns that, feeling greatly strengthened by the change of air and diet, and being passionately fond of sport, he resolved to join the minute-men of Young county, on a buffalo-hunt. Stella begged in vain to accompany him. The scouts refused to go, if she went along, for the reason that several trails of Comanches had been discovered on the Clear Fork.

When this news was communicated to her, she endeavored to prevail upon her father not to go, but he was obstinate. He had set his heart upon the hunt, and go he would. Therefore, it was with tears in her eyes that Stella bade him good-by, as he spurred his horse to join the minute-men at the spring, where they were filling their canteens.

Stella's mind was not at rest. Her father had not left the town, except for a short walk with her along the banks of the Brazos, since their arrival, and now he would ride many, many miles, become greatly fatigued, and would be ill in consequence. Now that he had really gone, the stories of Indian barbarities, which had been told to her, were brought vividly to mind, and seemed no longer a laughing matter. Not only did this trouble her, but the fact that she had not received any letter from Charles Chase announcing his arrival in Texas, caused her anxiety; for he had written on the day of his sailing from Boston, and time enough had elapsed since then to have made two such voyages.

But we will leave Stella at the spring, her joyous face saddened, her laughter hushed and her eyes filled with unshed tears.

A score of horsemen sit their steeds, ten miles west of Fort Belknap, and within sight of the Clear Fork of the Brazos. Before them, a quarter of a mile in their front, is one of the grandest sights that man ever beheld—one vast herd of buffalo, as far as eye can reach, north and west. All came to a halt, and, at a signal from the captain, "Belknap Bill," who is in advance, all except one—and that one is the invalid lawyer who, eager to bring to earth his

first buffalo, dashed off to intercept a straggler from the mammoth herd, regardless of the shouts of warning in his rear.

He heeds them not, perhaps hears them not, in the insane excitement that the wonderful scene creates.

Slow moves that grand, magnificent mass of brutes, the long hair of their foreheads hanging down to their noses, and their bright, suspicious eyes glittering from its midst. Ever on the alert are those that are on the outside of the herd.

But what is it that has caused the Young county minute-men to halt before reaching their noble game?

Keen eyes have discovered a something that is unusual.

Afar toward the west is seen in the sun the glitter of lance points, betraying the presence of a war-party of Comanches. On they come, parting the herd right and left. On they bound, their wild steeds snorting and panting, as the torturing quirts are lashed hissing about their hams. That they have discovered the Texans, before the latter had detected their approach, is evident, or they would not thus leave the game that surrounds them.

As they approach they try to prevent the whites from estimating their number; but the minute-men have already seen enough to know that they cannot successfully cope with the bloodthirsty fiends who dash toward them, and that their lives depend upon their horses. They yell themselves hoarse, trying to recall Mr. Stearns; but he hears them not, for he is spurring madly after a buffalo, up a small creek that empties into the Clear Fork.

The minute-men whirl their steeds and dash for home.

A half-dozen Indians, as the war-party clears the herd, dashes to the north, in pursuit of the white hunter.

Turning, he discovers that the pirates of the plains are upon his track. He sees the minute-men gallop madly toward Fort Belknap, and he feels that he is lost—that his child will be left alone in the world!

The yelling fiends fly toward him like dry leaves before a "norther," and with horror in his eyes, and a prayer upon his quivering lips, he urges his horse through the timber to the plain beyond, hoping to rejoin the minute-men as he has a horse of great speed.

He gains the plain, and hears the Indians crashing through the bottom in his rear. He drives spurs home, and with terrific bounds his steed dashes madly over the plain, the savages hidden from his view by the bottom timber of the creek. On, on he goes, for a quarter of a mile, when he feels himself flying downward with great velocity. Then comes a terrific shock, and then all is silence, darkness, chaos!

The Comanches break through the undergrowth. They see the Texans flying before their yelling comrades afar off, but otherwise the plain is bare. No living object is on that vast expanse. The lone hunter, whose scalp they had felt so sure, would hang bleeding at the belt of some one of them, was nowhere to be seen.

Had the ground swallowed him and his steed?

Had he flown, like the buzzard, beyond the sight of human eye?

No. He had followed the cover of the timber up the creek. That must be it, of course.

This decision formed, they all, with terrific yells of vengeance, dashed madly up the stream, crashing through the underbrush, eager, insane with a thirst for human blood!

CHAPTER II.

SINGLE EYE.

"YER see, boyees, twa an' ther ole mare hes slashed 'round Texas an' New Mex' some considerable, an' never got bogged yit. 'Sides thet, we hes tored through ther dang'd cactus on ther t'other side, ther Grande in ole Mex' a heap. 'Skip-lively!' Thet's what yer hes heard me call my nag. Thet's what I hed her christened, an' hit war done squar' et thet, plum under ther Blanco falls, with a hefty sprinklin'. Skip-lively gut some ha'r tored off up an' down ther chap'rells, but hit grewed out ag'in. Hit war tored off ther blind side, slick an' clean, 'specially 'roun' ther shoulders an' hinders from whirlin' too quick when I thought a cussed Greaser war a-sneakin' up on me. Her left side used ter 'pear like ther meat side of a rawhide, an' arter new ha'r comed out, hit war considerable darker, an' thet made ther San Antone boyees laugh, an' sw'ar thet I hed stole two hesses in Mex', cut 'em in tow, an'

stuck half of each tergether, so nobody could take a afferdavy ter ary one. Big Foot Wallace war thar et San Antone when I roved, an' I thought he'd go crazy when he see'd me an' Skip come inter ther Alamo Plaza a-kinder slow an' dis'p'inted like. Yer see, we war both putty well used up, an' didn't keer a cuss fer nobuddy, nor whether ther sun shined, or hit rained panther cats. But arter I'd gut a squar' meal at Immeke's, an' Skip war feeded up right smart at Whittle's—Sappin'ton said he wouldn't hev my nag in his stable, fear o' demoralizin' ther stage hosses—wa'al, arter both on us gut our internals a-goin' reg'lar, I war ready ter talk 'thout gittin' mad. When I fust come in, Big Foot he jist turned a half han'-spring up ag'in' ther Alamo door, whar Davy Crockett made his big stan', then he giv' a yell thet stomped six Gov'ment mule teams, throwed nine Mex'can weemin off'n ther burros, an' sent ther condemned long-eared things like blue whistlers toward t'other side ther river, made George Patsing drap a quarter o' beef right inter ther dirt, what he war 'bout ter hang up in ther leetle stone market in ther middle o' ther Plaza, brunged out Alamo No. 2 engine on ther whiz, an' come dang'd nigh bein' ther death o' Phil Immeke, who war cuttin' up free lunch.

"Phil hed jist h'isted a berlony sassage ter his feed-box, an' es ther yell struck him, he rammed ther sassage inter his feeder, quick es a flash grabbed his knife an' skuted 'roun' ther bar, thinkin' ther 'Paches war makin' a streak through ther Plaza. Then he run ag'in' ther pertition, an' thet jist rammed ther berlony hum. He'd 'a' choked ter death, dead sure, ef Dutch Pete an' Steve Speed an' Jack Hodge hedn't bin thar. Steve throwed Phil down on ther floor an' him an' Jack sot on him, a hol'-in' him down, while Dutch Pete jerked out ther berlony. Phil's eyes stuck out like b'iled onions floatin' in bleed, an' he didn't know whether he war in Texas er Dutchland. Afore he kim to hisself, ther boyees managed ter pour down four er five errigates, an' cleaned out ther free lunch.

"Over et Vance an' Brother's big store a tenderfoot hed jist axed fer change fer a twenty-dollar gold piece, an' ther clark jist passed ther Mex' dollars, when ther yell knocked all ther squar' idees outen him. Tom Copeland, ther ginger-pop man—he's a merry, chuck-full-o'-fun cuss—war jist comin' outen Commerce street, 'roun' ther corner o' ther City Hotel, whar Fuller keeps, in his two-wheel pop-cart, an' his nag gi'n a jump what rolled Tom over back'ards, cl'ar o' ther hind-board inter ther dirt in a bunch, an' he ca'dn't git up till Jack an' Steve an' Pete struck him, they hevin' levanted from Phil's afore Phil hed come back sencerble enough ter diskiver they hed gone through his lunch, an' lower'd ther whisk' in his decanters. Ther guard turned out down ter ther barracks, an' ther mules what war in ther kerral nex' ther Alamo, jist stomped 'roun' an' come nigh trompin' five er six teamsters ter death.

"George Horner war over et ther Menger House a-takin' a drink o' beer with Menger, an' ther yell skeered him so he jumped outen his goggles, stomped on 'em an' smashed 'em, an' slung ther beer, tumbler and all, 'cross ther bar ag'in' a big lookin'-glass what cos' Menger three hundred dollars. At ther same time, Menger he le'pt outen ther bar, an' ther folkses what war a-boardin' et ther hotel, come a-flyin' down-stairs, heels over head, on a wild stompede, thinkin' thet ther devil hed broke loose, er ther house war afire. Menger, hearin' ther lookin'-glass smash ahind him, turned quick, an' seein' ther damage George hed done, lit inter him, an' they hed it, tooth an' nail. Right then, 'Alamo No. 2' come a-whirlin' in, an' Menger, hearin' ther bell an' bein' fust boss o' ther engine, gi'n George Horner a hefty knock abint ther ear, what laid him out, fer sure.

"Big Foot, he didn't know 'bout ther circus he hed started, an' I didn't see hit half; but I see'd enough ter know ther war a ole he-rumpus started, an' I tole Wallace ter skute 'roun' an' jump ther kerral fence, 'fore folks foun' out hit war him. He levanted, an' jist managed ter keep in ther laugh ontill he climbed ther fence, an' then he bu'sted.

"But ther circuss warn't 'nough ter satisfy Big Foot; fer 'stead o' gittin' inter ther mule kerral, he crawled over whar ther dang'd Gov'ment animiles war. Thar war 'bout forty on 'em I b'lieve, an' es Wallace bu'st out a-laughin', ther condemned critters made a rush, broke down ther pickets, an' dusted on a stompede

through ther Plaza, skeerin' everybody 'bout ter death.

"I tell yer, I war mad ter see sich a rumpus kicked up jist 'bout me an' Skip, an' I skuted 'roun' back o' ther Alamo ter Commerce street, put Skip up et Whittle's, an' levanted fer ther Alamo. Sich a mixed up mess es they war thar! Burros, an' cammils, an' saddle-nags; Greasers, Frenchmen, Texans, an' all sorts o' folkses, an' everybody gone clean lunny. But when they tuck a peep et me, they thought I war 'bout ther luniest o' ther lot.

"I went ter ther kitchen an' gut a squar' meal, an' then I gut a bottle o' whisk' outen ther bar, an' skuted fer ther kerral. Thar I foun' Big Foot out back o' hit, rollin' on ther grass, a-clawin' up dirt, with his sombrero rammed inter his beef-trap ter keep ther laugh down fer fear o' stompedin' 'bout six hundred mules what war in thar big kerral. When he see'd me I thought he'd hev a conniption fit. But I held up ther whisk' bottle, an' he sort o' simmered down, takin' a hefty snifter; then I tuck a squar' suck, an' eot down, an' Big Foot ses, ses he, 'Whar in thunderation nev yer bin, Single Eye, ole pard, an' what yer bin doin' ter Skip-lively? She looks like ye'd gut a painter ter varnish her, an' he'd gi'n up ther job when he warn't but half done.'

"Ses I, 'Yer needn't ter laugh et my mare.

We hes bin through blazes since we went one eye apiece on yer. Didn't yer notice thet hit war ther blind side o' ner what's so shiny? Wa-al, hit's all new ha'r. We hes bin cross ther Grande, an' she gut scraped in ther chap'rells; but I'm teetotally bamfoozled ef yer ain't in a wuss scrape now, Wallace; fer they is boun' ter find out who hes whooped 'em up, an' done all this damage.'

"Jist thet moment, a tenderfoot in a stove-pipe sombrero an' a b'iled shirt come 'roun' ther corner o' ther kerral, an' seein' me an' Wallace, he ses, ses he:

"'Whar's Big Foot?'

"'Hyer I are,' ses Wallace, plum full o' laugh.

"'Wa-al, hyer's ten dollars fer yer,' ses ther tenderfoot. 'I made twenty outen thet yell, an' I'm makin' a divide wi' yer.'

"Then he sloped, an' Big Foot an' me gazed et ther Mex' dollars what he tossed down; an' after a while, ses I, 'Wallace, yer better git. Ef ther tenderfoot hes tumbled ter yer racket, ther rest o' ther boyees hes likewise, an' yer'll hev a heap o' bills ter pay.'

"'Dog-goned ef I don't b'lieve yer's talkin' square, pard,' ses Big Foot. 'I'll dust fer ther Post Oaks!'

"An' he dusted, an' tuck my whisk' with him. An' now, boyees, yer knows all 'bout my last meetin' with Big Foot Wallace; but I reckon when we-uns glides back San Antone way, I bin run yer down ter his ranch on ther Frio, an' mebbe so show yer his panther—thet air, ef ther crittur air still scratchin' an' hain't wilted."

The speaker, Single Eye, the old scout of upper Frio country, was a most peculiar individual.

He was small in stature, and very thin in flesh; although, to use his own words, "He could s'pile more buffer hump at one sittin' nor ary four tender-huffs what could be shuck up." He was wiry, and tough as steel, with the strength of a man twice his size.

He had roamed mountain, prairie, and chaparral, since the Mexican war, in which he had served in Jack Hays's celebrated regiment of ragged Texas Rangers, who cut their way from the Rio Grande to the City of Mexico, but arrived after General Scott had taken possession of the Montezuma capital. Single Eye was noted through the Southwest as a scout and ranger, but was perhaps brought into more particular notice from the fact that, as his cognomen implied, he was minus his left eye, this optic having been pierced by a nearly spent Apache arrow, in a fight on Devil's river, in the Pecos country.

The arrow pierced the ball of the eye, causing it to run out, and leaving the lids tightly glued over the vacant socket.

Single Eye, while recounting his last meeting with Big Foot Wallace, at the request of his listeners, was, like them, lying upon his blanket near a smoldering camp-fire.

The old scout was clad in greasy, tattered buckskin breeches, a blue woolen shirt in the same condition, and a sombrero to match. A brace of Colt's army revolvers, old style, and a huge howie-knife were buckled about his waist.

There were five horses and two pack-mules staked near at hand; but one of these stood listlessly, with drooping head, within ten feet of Single Eye, and seemed to be listening intently to the recital of the old scout.

This was the scout's mare, and, strange as it may appear, the left eye of the beast was wanting also.

The mare, too, was raw-boned, but long-limbed and muscular, strongly marked for speed, as well as endurance.

The long, originally dark-brown hair of the scout, but which was now sunburnt and dead in appearance, was mixed with gray, and the mane and tail of the mare were in a corresponding condition, as was also its coat of hair, one side of which, however, was sleek and glossy, in strong contrast with the other. Certainly man and horse were never more appropriately matched.

Stretched upon the blankets, near the old scout, were three youths, neither of them being more than nineteen years of age, all gazing intently at the single eye of the old scout's guide; and, although at times convulsed with laughter, they withheld their mirth lest they should break the thread of the narration, and thus lose the best of it.

All three were Boston boys, who had left their homes of ease and comfort, one to seek the girl he loved most dearly, and the others in search of health, and to gain a knowledge of the country that books could not give them. They were all appareled alike, and armed in the same manner—that is, each with a pair of six-shooters, so called on the border, and a bowie-knife.

As the reader may perhaps have surmised, they are Charles Chase, and his two school-mates, John Fox and George Wolfe—they having arrived safely at Matagorda bay, traveled with a wagon train to San Antonio, and there providentially fallen in with Single Eye, who had purchased for them their outfit, and been engaged to guide them not only to Fort Belknap, but afterward beyond, on a contemplated buffalo hunt.

After a most interesting and, to them, novel trip, we introduce them to the reader in camp on Pecan river, some fifteen miles northwest from Santa Ana's Peak.

Nearly three months have passed since Charles bade Stella Stearns farewell in Boston, and it was now two months since he had received the letter which announced her safe arrival, with her invalid father, at Fort Belknap.

As the old scout closed his amusing narrative, the three young men lay for some moments in silent thought, gazing upon Single Eye in admiration, as they pondered over in their minds the thousand and one hair-breadth escapes he had had from a horrible death, which had been related by others while they were, for a few days, stopping at the Menger House in San Antonio.

Charles Chase was nearly six feet in height, with hazel eyes and dark-brown hair, an honest, manly, fearless look, and a symmetrical form.

Fox and Wolfe were less in stature, and much thinner in flesh, both having dark hair and eyes, and a sallow, sickly look, which Single Eye promised should disappear, "arter they struck bufler humps, an' marrer an' tongues."

Delicate as the two appeared, their eyes were bright and flashing, showing a go-ahead and vim beyond the power of their weak frames, and proving that, mentally at least, they were equal to the situation—that all their senses were acute.

Had their eyes not indicated this, their actions would; for they were quick and nervous, their movements of body and limb showing in more ways than one, if a person studied them, that they would keep on their feet, and on the move, until Nature should break down entirely, and they were at death's door.

Single Eye had made great sport of their names, saying he had heard "ov a wolf chasin' a fox, but he hed never afore see'd three humans kerraled tergether, wi' sich peculiar cogs."

"Does Big Foot Wallace stay on his ranch much of his time?" inquired Charles.

"No. He ain't thar more'n one moon outen ther twelve altergether. He's rampagin' 'bout like myself, hyer an' thar, arter scalps, b'ars, buflers, er ther condemned Greasers o' Cortina. He's some en ther shoot an' slash, an'—"

The old scout ceased abruptly in his speech, jerked his revolver, and with the rapidity of a flash of light, fired, aiming the weapon toward the river into a thicket not more than ten feet from his position.

As the loud, spiteful report rung out on the night, a hideous paint-daubed Indian, with bow in hand and arrow between his fingers, sprung high in the air, out from the bushes, throwing his arms upward in agony, and then launched, heels over head, in terrible death-struggles, rolling over and over upon the three youths, who were completely dazed and terrified at so unexpected a sight.

The Indian writhed upon the sward, like a scorched snake, for a moment, and then staggered to an erect position; and, before Single Eye could reach the red-man and prevent it, a wild, piercing, unearthly death-yell shot through the moon-lit air, echoing in and out the rock caverns on the opposite side of the stream. Then, as the yell left the warrior's lips, he fell to the earth with a sickening sound, a hideous, repulsive corpse.

"Pack up, an' saddle, boyees! Quick es a gar kin skute, er our ha'r ain't worth shucks!"

Thus ordered Single Eye, in a shrill and imperative tone, as he sprung for the pack-mules, his one optic rolling nervously in its socket, and darting glances here and there, that seemed to penetrate the darkness of the dense undergrowth.

CHAPTER III. THE MINUTE MEN.

BELKNAP BILL kept in the rear of his men, casting back frequent glances at the fast pursuing, yelling horde of Comanches, until he saw that he could not only hold his distance, but that he gained considerably; the horses of himself and men being fresh and well fed, while the mustang of the Indians had evidently been running buffalo on the "range," where there was no more grass than on a house-floor, after the vast migrating herds had passed over the plains.

Having arrived at this conclusion, Bill gave a signal yell, and his men all quickly drew rein, whirled their steeds to face the foe, and at the same time brought their Sharp's rifles to a position for immediate use.

"I don't perpose ter make a stand hyer, boyees," said Bill, "fer they'd git ther dead-wood on us an' skin every head in our crowd. We-'uns 'd send some consider'ble on 'em over ther divide without givin' 'em a show fer death songs, but they'd take us in outen ther wet in ther end. What-I wants air ter draw ther red scarifiers 'way from ther crick, ter gi'n Mister Stearns a fa'r show ter git up an' dust. I don't reckon they see'd him, an' I'm purty sartin thet he skuted fer timber. Ef he gut tuck by ther red howlers, I swar I couldn't go back ter ther fort. I couldn't b'ar ter see Miss Stellar take on 'bout him. I know she'd t'ar her ha'r, an' mebbe so go crazy. I think we-'uns better take another run ter ther Clear Fork; go jist a-b'illin' towards ther timber until we gits ter ther southerly bend, an' then lay fer ther cusses in ther bush an' gi'n 'em a taste o' Belknap lead. What d'yer say, boyees? Is it a whack?"

"All right, Cap!" was the ready response. "Herd up yer Injuns an' we'll pepper 'em, Bill, yer jist bet!"

"My fingers is itchin' now ter pull trigger!" "We'll lay fer 'em, Bill, sure es ye're borned!"

These were the cries with which they answered their leader; and whirling his horse, the yells of the Comanches being an incentive to speed and action, Bill gave a shrill whistle, and on over the plain dashed the minute-men, their horses legs' throwing the seeds from the tall grass in all directions.

Only a short distance did they ride in the direction they had previously pointed; for at a signal from Belknap Bill they turned gradually toward the bottom-timber of the Clear Fork.

At the time of their short halt, the Indians had thought the whites were making a stand for battle; and when the latter again started at headlong gallop the foe filled the air with their whoops of chagrin and derision. But when the Texans turned toward the timber, the Comanches felt sure that they were taking to cover for the purpose of self-defense, and they well knew that, with their overwhelming force, they could annihilate the hated pale-face, but when the minute-men proceeded on, parallel with the stream, the Indians were at a loss to know their object.

Belknap Bill knew every crook and turn of the stream, as did his men, and they "hugged" the timber at a point about one mile from an abrupt turn of the river, and when this was reached, dashed around the curve at headlong speed.

"Turn in!" yelled Bill. "Turn in! Lariat yer nags by ther drink, an' skute fer ther border o' ther timber!"

In less than five minutes every horse was secured in the thicket on the brink of the Clear Fork, and with rifles grasped and two cartridges hanging from their teeth by the loose ends, each man sprung through the trees and crouched on one knee in the bushes above the bend, where they could see the yelling horde lashing their mustangs onward toward the ambush.

Cunning as they were, the Comanches did not suppose that the little band of whites would outwit them and dare to make a stand against two hundred braves.

On, like the rush of a tornado, came the painted fiends, their black eyes glittering with a thirst for blood, their mustangs snorting, as the cruel raw-hide quirts cut about their hams, their lances gleaming, the scalps that decorated them flying wildly above the heads of the braves.

The lances inclined to the rear, the lower ends in a socket of the stirrups, the middle of the shaft held to the arm by a strap, and from the same arm hung the buffalo-skin shield, circular in form, painted curiously, and trimmed on the outer edge with the different-colored scalps of the murdered women and children of the feared and hated Texans.

Many of the mustangs of the most noted warriors and chiefs were painted for war, as well as their masters, one half of the animal daubed from head to ham with narrow stripes of vermilion, the other half with wide stripes of white gypsum, causing both human and brute to appear both hideous and unearthly. The eyes of the mustangs rolled wildly, and their nostrils were distended in a degree painful to witness, as each breath was forced out with a snort, and white foam flew from their jaws at every bound.

On they came, totally unprepared for sudden conflict, their arms all secured to their sides, their whole aim now being to urge their already overtaxed animals to greater speed.

Haste on, warriors of the Llanos! Haste to your death! Retribution for your cowardly murders of women and babes! Retribution for the savage torture of strong men in their prime! Retribution for the burning of happy homes is close at hand for many of you! Sound your last blood curdling whoops of war, and mutter your death-songs as you ride, for the brave minute-men of Young county shoot to kill!

"Gi'n 'em hot lead, soon as yer sees ther eyes glitter, boyees, an' plug 'em plum through, every mother's son o' yer! Down creek, boyees! Pull on ther right hand reds, an' so on 'long ther line. Load up quick, an' let fly afore they bes gut time ter think what's up. Then gi'n 'em another shot when they is mixed up an' frustrated by ther death-yells an' stomped-in mustangs. When I gi'n a reg'lar ole Belknap yell, break brush, jerk yer sixes, an' pepper ther red devils—pepper 'em good!"

These directions were rapidly spoken, as the Comanches dashed toward the curve in the timber, and their concealed foes.

The minute-men braced themselves, laid one cartridge at their feet, and partly tore the other, which was retained between the teeth; then the long line of deadly tubes was thrust out from the thin screen of twigs and leaves, and as a low whistle broke from Bill's lips, the score of rifles exploded simultaneously, and no sooner had the leaden messengers of death left the muzzles, than nimble fingers handled cartridge, shoved the same into the vacant and still smoking chambers, snapped the lever into place, then quickly tossed the rifle to shoulder and blazed away. This time an appalling, scattered volley, quickly followed by another, brought death and consternation in the ranks of the Comanches. All the leading warriors threw up their arms, and with death-yells, half smothered by the blood that welled into their throats and nostrils, fell backward from their terrified, plunging mustangs, that now sprung, unrestrained, in all directions.

Few were there that received wounds that were not mortal, and these clung with desperation to their steeds, which dashed out, snorting wildly, on the open plain.

The war-party all jerked their mustangs to halt, filled with amazement at the totally unexpected fire of the whites.

Had the ground opened and swallowed up their leading braves, they could not have been more astonished and appalled; and before they recovered, another discharge of leaden hail tore through their ranks, sending many more of their most noted warriors to the "land beyond the moon."

Death-yells, screams of wounded mustangs, monotonous chants of the dying, rallying cries, whoops of encouragement, all rung through the arches of the bottom timber, through which lazily curled the clouds of sulphurous smoke.

There was no opening for closing in with the whites with their long lances, and the bushes were too thick to admit of much execution with their arrows; but, on the impulse of the moment, driven to desperation, the Comanches drew bows, and with the rapidity of thought, each grasped three arrows between the fingers of their left hands, one was quickly fitted to bow-string, and then made ready for a charge. But before the bows were half bent, the third deadly volley from the Sharp's rifles of the Belknap Boys hurtled through the demoralized ranks of the Indians, and with yells of vengeful fury, followed by wild war-whoops and piercing signals from the chief in command, all dashed into the timber, and charged through the undergrowth upon the rear of the little band of whites.

Now came the time of great peril to the minute-men; for, should the Indians cut them off from their horses, and press upon them in overwhelming numbers, forcing them from their cover to the open, they were doomed, to the very last man, either to immediate death, or what was far worse, a terrible and lingering torture!

They knew that there was nothing which the red fiends could invent that would not be put to use by them, did they succeed in surrounding, or in pressing them to the plain.

It was indeed a most critical moment for the Young county minute-men; but they half whirled and sprung clear of the border bushes some five paces, where the towering timber was comparatively free from thickets. Here the tree-trunks afforded shelter, but this they did not propose to take advantage of until the last moment.

Leaning their rifles against these tree-trunks, having slipped in each a cartridge, and holding them in reserve, the voice of Belknap Bill now rung clear as a bell:

"Draw sixes, an' pick triggers lively, boyees, or we're gone coons! This air our las' chance ter save ha'r! Drop a red hellyun every shot! Skute fer yer nags es yer sends yer las' lead, an' keep ther loads in ther Sharps' fer ther clos'test business! Hyer ther condemned eusses come, jist as bil'in'—bury every bullet in ther red meat!"

The scene was now truly terrific. It would have been most appalling to any band of men except those of whom we write, each one of whom had braved death in the same form a hundred times. It would have seemed hopeless, and caused them, in nine cases out of ten, to have become perfectly helpless and unresisting.

Filled with frenzy at their losses, the blood-thirsty fiends, their faces contorted with demoniac fury, crashed through the undergrowth toward the whites, an overwhelming avalanche of men, and wild, snorting, maddened steeds—an avalanche that was pregnant with death and hellish torture.

But the Belknap Boys quailed not, and although the terrible sight before them was well calculated to demoralize the stoutest heart unused to such scenes, and to render their efforts at defense useless, they stood like men of iron, with left foot forward, and right braced, while in each hand was clutched a deadly "Colt's," full cocked and fingers on triggers. To their left, concealed amid the bushes, were their horses—their only hope, after they should check the crashing charge of the Comanches, that is, if they should be so fortunate as to do so.

Death was awaiting the painted foe. A death which those who held the deadly tubes knew they well merited, and no more mercy was in the hearts of the whites than in those of their enemies. A wild yell of exultation burst from the front ranks of the Indians, as they discovered the little band, and a flight of arrows cut the air, many of which, however,

were made to glance aside by branch, twig, or vine, and the points of others were buried in the trunks of trees. Two of the Belknap Boys were struck by the flying shafts, but not in vital parts; and then, above the hellish din, rung the voice of Bill:

"Whoop 'em up, boyees! Whoop 'em up!"

To describe the scene that followed this order would be impossible. Two hundred and forty shots were fired by the minute-men, as fast as nimble fingers could act. One continuous roar of revolvers, without a break, and the leaden hail hurtled through the bottom, followed by a vocal pandemonium that can scarcely be imagined.

Terrified mustangs tore through the undergrowth in every direction, trampling wounded and dead beneath their hoofs. The boys were enveloped in smoke; and, masked by this, and fearing that their animals would be stampeded, they grasped their rifles and bounded toward the river, just in time to save their affrighted horses from breaking away from the trees to which they had been secured.

"Mount, boyees, an' git up an' git! Ther pic-nic air over fer one while!"

Thus yelled Belknap Bill, and his men were not slow to obey, for they knew that there was enough of the painted fiends yet eager for battle to annihilate them to the last man.

"Cross ther drink, boyees! We'll skute down t'other side, er ther pesky hellyuns 'll kerral us yit!"

Fording the river, unnoticed by the demoralized Comanches, the minute-men drove spurs to their horses, leaving behind them three times their own number of hideous corpses, and five times as many maddened, frenzied warriors, who craved their blood and scalps, with an insane, savage, and unnatural longing.

CHAPTER IV.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH.

OUR invalid friend, Henry Stearns, was for hours devoid of all sense, and recovered consciousness very slowly. At first he felt as if in a dream, and it seemed to him that he had been clutched by hideous fiends, who had, with terrible yells, grasped him, and urging their demon steeds at terrific speed across a sea of moving shapes of horror, had hurled him over the brink of a dizzy steep, down which he fell with a velocity that filled him with agony. But the shock he received when he struck the bottom of the gloomy depths, had seemed to crush every bone in his body, as well as to paralyze his brain.

As he slowly regained his balance of mind, however, he realized that a portion of what had seemed a dream was a reality. He recollected his dash after the buffalo, on the border of the vast army of bison, and the discovery of the Indians.

He recalled their hideous yells, as they sped after him, and his own almost hopeless despair, as he urged his horse through the creek bottom beneath the sheltering screen of tree and bush. He remembered clearing the timber, seeing the Belknap Boys fleeing before a large war-party, and his own resolve to join them, if his horse was equal to the race. Then he knew, that both himself and steed had plunged downward from the level plain, and had struck with a shock that had bereft him of all senses. As he thus arrived at a lucid solution of his condition and position, he opened his eyes and realized that he was lying upon his back in some dark excavation, or natural chasm.

A blue, moonlit, star-studded sky was overhead, though it was dark as Erebus where he lay; the boundaries of the chasm being easily followed, which were square in form, but, as he gazed upward, a heavy groan and labored breathing at his side attracted his notice, and he felt sure that the sound proceeded from his horse which must be suffering from a broken limb.

He almost feared to move, lest he should find that some of his own bones were broken; but a moment's reflection caused him to reason that were such the case, he would be in pain, and he raised himself slowly on his elbow, facing in the direction of the sounds he had heard.

He stretched out his hand, and it came in contact with the warm skin of what he felt sure was his horse, the animal being quite near to him. Running his hand over the beast, he followed the shoulder down to the foreleg, and discovered that the limb was not only broken, but that the bare bone had plunged into the

earth, forcing flesh and skin upward. The poor beast must be suffering intense agony, and could not possibly live, hence it would be an act of mercy to kill the animal. This he did, drawing his bowie-knife across the horse's throat, stopping his ears with his fingers, that he might not hear the spatter of blood upon the hard earth.

Thoughts of Stella, and her grief and misery at his absence, tortured him, and he imagined that the Indians had slain all the minute-men, and then dashed on to Fort Belknap, sacking the town, and taking his daughter captive.

These thoughts were so near to being realities in his weak, nervous brain, that he sprung to his feet in horror, as he fancied he now saw his only child, his beautiful Stella, being borne over the plains toward the far-away villages of the Comanches, to a fate too terrible to think of—a fate worse than torture or death!

But, as he sprung to his feet, even these terrible thoughts were banished from his mind by discovering two large and fiery eyes burning through the darkness from the opposite side of the pit.

His flesh began to creep, his hair seemed to be turned to snakes that squirmed and twisted about his head; his blood was one moment as molten lead, and the next the very marrow in his bones seemed congealed to ice.

His teeth chattered, his eyelids twitched nervously, and he trembled as if stricken with an ague fit.

He had been grateful to God, for his providential escape from torture and death at the hands of the Indians; but now, a fate seemed impending from which there was no escape, for he had run his hand along the side of the chasm, and found it to be smooth and perpendicular.

He had read in books of travel, that the eyes of a panther were, in the night, like coals of fire, and he now felt positive that in the pit in which he was imprisoned, a panther was his only living companion—a companion that would rend him limb from limb!

He now recalled the warning words of Belknap Bill, while riding toward the range, in regard to the great danger which attended buffalo-hunting on the plains, from the numerous sink holes in the vicinity of their proposed run. Bill had told him that portions of the earth, generally square in form, sunk below the surface of the plain, in some cases to the depth of twenty feet, from some unknown cause, forming dangerous pits which the tall grass on their edges preventing from being seen in time.

These explanations of Bill forced Stearns to the conclusion that it was into one of these he had fallen, and that in consequence of the grass, the Indians had not discovered him. The sink-hole had been his salvation, as far as the Indians were concerned; but he was now threatened with another, and a far more terrible danger.

As has been mentioned, Stearns fixed his eyes upon those horrible fiery orbs that lost not their brilliancy for an instant, gazing straight at him, without wink or motion, with a glare that seemed to burn into his very soul. He at length remembered that he was armed—that his knife and revolver were buckled about his waist; and this promised him a possible protection and deliverance.

He had been so unaccustomed to carrying weapons, that he had quite forgotten them; however, it would in all probability lead to his capture and death, should he fire off his revolver, for he had no doubt that the Indians were still in the vicinity, on the watch for him. The pistol, therefore, was of no use. Death stared him in the face—death at the hands of the Indians, death from starvation, death from being torn and devoured by that terrible beast, in the darkness around him! Death, on all sides threatened him. There was no hope, for the plains swarmed with war-painted savages, and this would prevent a search by the Belknap minute-men, who, even though they might wander for days in an endeavor to trace him, might not discover the sink-hole.

There was not one ray of hope to cheer him. All at once he recollected that the carcass of his horse was at his side, and that the beast with the fiery eyes might, if he were not there, gorge himself on the dead animal, and thus satisfy its hunger without devouring him. It was a happy thought, and he wondered it had not occurred to him before. Slowly, and with great caution he stepped along the south side of the chasm, his pistol at full cock in one hand, the other feeling the wall to guide him;

but the terrible eyes still followed him—still remained in the same position.

He reached the west side of the pit, and stood in the corner, still gazing at the glaring eyes which seemed to hold his own by a horrible fascination which he could not overcome, and which caused his own orbs to burn, and become dry and glassy for want of the fluid which the rigid lids refused to supply. Thus he stood, and it appeared to him to be many, many hours, he disbelieving that daylight would ever again be known upon earth, stood until his limbs trembled and shook under him, and he felt that weakness, and fatigue, and sleep would overcome him, and leave him at last to the mercy of the terrible beast.

Again he prayed most fervently to be preserved from the deadly dangers by which he was surrounded; but had it not been for the thought that his daughter, his Sella lived, and would suffer untold grief and anguish at his loss, he would have prayed for death.

His limbs at last refused to bear him up, and he sunk to a sitting posture in one corner of the cave.

He longed to gaze up at God's stars in their pure field of blue, for he felt that a sight of the sky would be a relief; but he could not withdraw his eyes from that fiery, steady, staring horror across the pit.

After some little time had passed, these blazing eyes seemed to dance before his vision, and to fly hither and thither, till at length they vanished altogether, for the tired, heavy lids of the invalid slowly met, closing over the eyes so long tortured, shutting out the world, with all the misery and danger and dread that had so terribly oppressed his brain.

Henry Stearns was asleep. Nature had succumbed to protracted and unusual fatigue, privation and prostrating horror. Nature was merciful.

For an hour the invalid lay thus upon the bottom of the pit, his back leaning against the wall, his head bent forward upon his breast, the muzzle of his revolver held down with feeble grasp.

For an hour the cave was silent as the tomb, those wild eyes still blazing immovably upon the corner where the sleeper sat.

An hour, and then those fiery orbs moved—moved forward slowly, but steadily, toward the sleeper; moved across the bottom of the pit, and at last came within a foot of the face of the sleeping man, who, as if even now conscious of the fearful danger that threatened him, but unable to throw off the lethargy that prevented even a show of defense, groaned heavily.

He became aware that something unnatural was in contact with his face, and when his ideas became more clear, and like a flash of light the near past was suddenly recalled, he felt a cold, clammy substance drawn over his face, which suggested the caress of a corpse.

He opened his eyes in an instant, quickly chilled to the very bone with horror, and there, right before him, not a foot from his face, were those terrible eyes, still gazing into his, and burning into his soul!

Henry Stearns gave one wild shriek of horrible, hopeless despair, and then sunk forward beneath those blazing orbs, limp and senseless.

CHAPTER V.

THE SURPRISE.

IN ten minutes after the Comanche had fallen dead in their little camp, Single Eye and the "boyees from Boston," had all their effects packed upon the mules, the horses saddled and were ready for a start.

"All set for glidin'?" All ready for a skute, boyees?" asked the old scout, in a cautious tone. "Keep yer rifles cross yer hips, et half-cock, an' yer sixes slipped roun' on yer belts in front, whar yer kin grip 'em, of we're jumped suddint like by ther red bellyuns. I'll jist kerral this scarifyer's crop o' ha'r, 'fore we start, an' then leave him fer a kiote ter lunch on. He'll never tortur' another woman er chile, er sot fire ter a Texan's cabin. His last war-whoop hes sounded, an' they air whoopin' him up somewhar an' makin' him dance on hot coals livelier nor he ever shuck a foot et a sculp, green-corn, war, er new-moon fandango.

"But I'm a-bettin' thet we-uns hes lively biz ahead. Mebbe so ther red cusses hes gut ther citz o' Fort Belknap kerral'd in ther burg; fer they hes done thet a-way 'fore now, an' burned up ther hearse what come'd in from St. Louis, 'sides sculpin' all the passengers. Hyer's

ther condemned cuss's sculp, ears an' all; an' ef ther war-party finds his carkiss, they'll know Single Eye air roun' on his usual biz, fer I hes dug out one o' the scarifyer's peepers, which air my sign o' late, an' stan's fer my mark an' brand. B'lieve, ef I goes ter stock-raisin', I'll hev' ter extercate a eye outen every boss, an' steer, an' cow, an' calf, what 'longs ter me, an' claim every one-eyed animal 'bout my range."

Single Eye rattled off his remarks rapidly, as he scalped the Comanche; Skip-lively standing near him, watching his every movement with critical eye, actually heaving a sigh of relief when he had finished in so satisfactory a manner, and paying no further attention to her master, until the latter sprung astride.

As may be supposed, Chase, Fox, and Wolfe were greatly impressed, and not wholly free from alarm and dread, at the sudden and totally unexpected tragic scene which they had witnessed. The hideous, repulsive corpse of the Indian, was rendered more terrible still by the play of the moonlight upon it. It was the first hostile Indian any one of the three had ever beheld.

The dark shades of Pecan Bayou seemed now to be peopled with a thousand red braves, who only tortured them by postponing their war-cries and rush from covert. Single Eye reasoned that this spy was in advance of a war-party; and his concern, and hasty break of camp, was caused by his ignorance as to the location of the war-party's encampment.

"We'll jist skute over ther drink, boyees, and meander up stream a bit; then strike over toward Phantom Hill, nigh Elm Fork o' ther Brazos, an' ef ther reds don't gobble us, we'll skute off under kiver o' Elm Fork ter ther Clear Fork, whar we'll be purty clost' ter Fort Belknap, whar yer wants ter run in, Chase, an' see yer leetle gal. Hit's good forty mile ter Elm Fork, an' ef we follers ther drink hit's 'bout ther same distance from thar ter ther Clear Fork. We-uns kin kiver hit inside o' two suns without half tryin' er hurtin' our creetur's sides. Ef ther war-party war nigh enough ter hear my six bark, er thet condemned kiote yell, they'll be mighty apt ter hump themselves arter our ba'r; but me an' Skip'll keep a eye on every bush, an' you boyees kin put yer peepers on double duty et ther same time.

The scout spoke in a low tone, as the quartette rode down-stream together, the pack-mules following close in the rear.

"What is your opinion?" asked Chase. "Do you think the main war-party is encamped near enough to have heard your shot and the yell of the Comanches?"

"C'u'd'n't say," answered Single Eye, squirting his tobacco-juice over the head of his mare. "Yer kin hear a shooter, er a yell sich as thet red let out, fer a right smart distance on a still night like this. Thar is a owl hoot now an' then, an' a painter scream, an' kiotes air a-yelpin', but yer can't fool a red. They don't 'low no bugs ter crawl inter thar ears, yer kin bet on thet, an' we-uns hes gut ter stop our chin-waggin' 'bout now, fer hit's dangerous ter spit out tongue music on ther trail, 'spesh'ly when we knows thet ther cusses air sashayin' 'roun' ther bayou.

"Thar's a place, 'bout a hundred yards from hyer, whar we kin ford ther drink. You-uns glide 'long slow until I 'zamines things 'bout ther crossin'. Reckon ye'd better stop whar yer air, till I gi'ns a whistle."

With these words, Single Eye passed on within the shadows of the timber, leaving the youths sitting their horses in a small "open;" the pack-mules taking advantage of the halt to tear off the heads of the wild rye that grew rank and abundant around them.

The old scout spoke a word of caution to his mare, and the animal advanced toward the ford, slowly and stealthily, seeming to examine the ground ahead with her single optic, and to tread where no dead branch would be likely to crack, for the course was on the edge of the timber, where the rays of the moon shot in through the interstices of the trees, and illuminated the path, which had evidently been made by black bears, these animals being quite numerous on Pecan Bayou. When within twenty paces of the trail which led to the water and ford, Single Eye dismounted, patted his mare affectionately on the cheek, saying in a low tone:

"Skip, jist stan' right hyer an' keep still es a gar what hes swaller'd a dozen frogs, until I shows up. 'Low ther fles ter nibble et yer,

'thout stompin' er whiskin' yer tail; fer ther may be biz ahead."

With these words, the scout stole onward and peeped through the bushes down to the ford, and along on the opposite side of the stream.

The next instant he clasped his hand over his mouth, his one eye glittered with extreme pleasure and exultation, and he sat down abruptly, his frame convulsed with mirth, which he strove in vain to suppress. When his amusing thoughts had subsided, he broke out in low soliloquy:

"Dog'd ef ther cuss hes gut es much sense es a puserlanimous, pepper-eatin', pesky Piute! But he doesn't know thet Skip an' me air on ther whiz 'bout this-a-ways, an' he air 'scusable. Sottin' right plum in ther moonlight on the edge o' ther steep bank, an' plenty o' kiver right behind him ter gi'n anybody a fa'r show ter crawl up an' sen' him a-flyin'. I'll jist fotch ther boyees byer-a-ways, an' gi'n 'em a chance ter see a Curmanch make a Niagarar le'p inter Pecan Bayou an' kingdom come!"

Springing to his feet, the scout quickly made his way to where he had left the "boyees," speaking a word of caution to Skip-lively, as he passed the mare.

Explaining the situation to the youths, he bade them dismount, secure their horses, and follow him cautiously.

In a couple of minutes more they were all seated in the thicket and gazing with wide-open eyes at a war painted brave, who sat in plain view on the opposite side of the river, on the edge of the high bank to the east of the ford, and some forty feet above the water. No sooner had the old scout posted the boys, than he disappeared in the direction of the river.

Chase, Fox and Wolf were greatly excited, and at the same time filled with deep concern, for if Single Eye should chance to be killed, they would be no better off than so many lost children, and might be murdered by the Indians at any moment. Eagerly they watched the red brave, who, with the back of his scalping knife, was sharpening the iron points of his arrows, but at times gazing over the stream and sweeping the surrounding thickets, as if expecting a comrade to join him.

The minutes seemed hours to the watchers, but at last they saw Single Eye steal from the bushes in the rear of the Indian, circle his knife in the air recklessly to draw their attention, and then advance half-bent upon his unsuspecting foe. Gathering all the strength of his small, but wiry form, and holding in reserve his remarkable control of muscle, the one-eyed border hero advanced until within five paces of his victim, treading as softly as a panther approaches his prey, then with a bound like the same animal he reached the warrior, plunged the long bowie to the hilt in his side, then, like a flash of light, withdrew the knife, sprung back and, with a dexterous movement, threw his whole weight upon the back of the brave, feet first, which hurled the Comanche, end over end, down the forty feet of space. With a smothered outcry and a sounding splash, the Indian disappeared beneath the waters, the rapid current carrying the corpse swiftly away.

From the manner in which he had made use of himself in his attack on the Comanche, Single Eye was now himself "planted" in exactly the same spot, and the same position that the Indian had occupied, with his legs dangling over the steep bank; in fact it was only with an effort that he kept himself from following the red-man in his revolving "Niagara" leap. He held his position, however, and giving a peculiar low whistle, Skip-lively came ambling down to the ford, and crossing made her way up to the side of her master.

"Come on, boyees!" called out the old scout, waving his sombrero; "fotch yerself along this-a-ways. I'm a-bettin' we'll smell right smart o' ther red bellyuns 'fore long. Skip, skute, glide, levant, slosh 'long this-a-ways, an' j'ine ther one-eyed rampahannock o' Red river, an' other permisc'us an' prominent big drinks!"

It was a strange mixture of tragedy and comedy that the young men had been witnessing, and they began to fear that they would see more of the former than of the latter, before reaching Fort Belknap. But they now returned at once to their horses, mounted, and rode rapidly to the ford. Crossing the stream, they were joined by Single Eye, who forbade any conversation as the height of imprudence, saying at the start:

"Thar air a dead sure thing on runnin' ag'in' reds, an' gittin' skuped in, es we-uns ain't mighty keerful 'bout makin' a rumpus. Thar's a camp within five mile o' hyer, I know es well es I know I hain't gut but one peeper, an' I 'lows ter glide clos't ter hit, an' 'zamine ther hull lay-out. Jist 'low yer tongues ter take a see-ester, es ther Grande Greasers ses, an' keep yer peepers on double biz."

For three miles our friends pursued their way on the border of timber, and beneath the dark shadows cast by it along the river bank, when suddenly Single Eye halted throwing up one hand in a gesture of caution, at the same time dismounting and beckoning the young men to follow him, as he led Skip-lively into the dense dark shades of the bottom timber.

The old scout secured his mare, and his companions followed his example, while he drew them around him, and said, in a voice that was almost inaudible:

"Ther condemned kiotes, ther piruts o' ther plains air camped jist 'bove us. I tole yer I'd show yer a heap o' hellish things an' doin's on ther trail, an' I wants yer all ter crawl with me, an' take a peep et ther red soulders. We'll tie ther mules, an' skute; but be ormitly keerful 'bout whiskin' a branch, er trompin' on dead sticks, fer our ha'r air pasted on 'bout now purty consider'ble loose."

A monotonous, murmuring sound, peculiar and continuous, was heard, proceeding from up the river, as all remained silent, and listening intently, previous to their start.

"Thar's somethin' up with 'em, sure es yer is borned, boyees, er ther hell-hounds wouldn't be up this time o' night hevin' a pow-wow; but we'll soon satisfy ourselves 'bout thar doin's. Come on es easy es ef yer was crawl-in' on eggs, er through a prickly pear patch!"

After fifteen minutes of careful crawling, one after the other, on hands and knees, Single Eye in the lead, they reached the timber line that bordered the opening within which was the Comanche camp.

Here the old scout made his way up into the branches of an immense tree, which grew out from the trunk within four feet of the ground, and were thickly interlaced with vines. Here and there an arrow of moonlight pierced the boughs above, sufficient to enable our friends to follow each other. This they did, and all were soon high up in the branches; a position from which they could gaze over the dense undergrowth that had screened themselves, and also the camp, from view.

No sentinel had been discovered, and it was evident to Single Eye that the war-party was depending upon the two warriors that he had slain to warn them of the approach of any enemy from down the river.

When the daring scout had reached a favorable position, he gave a slight hiss, and was soon joined by the adventurous youths.

Single Eye now discovered that several fires were blazing, which he knew would so blur the eyes of the braves, who were wandering about among them, that they could not see a single object in the dark timber of the river bottom.

Chase, Fox and Wolfe gazed downward, and shuddered from head to foot.

The camp of the Comanches was spread out to their view.

At least a hundred and fifty war-painted braves were stalking about the fires, and it seemed to the terrified boys that they themselves could not possibly escape being discovered and butchered.

CHAPTER VI.

HE COMES NOT.

STELLA STEARNS sat for many long, weary hours by the spring where her father had parted from her.

She laved her head in the clear, salt, bluish waters. This greatly refreshed her, and she then proceeded up the river, along the smooth shore, until she reached the shade of the trees that bordered the banks, there being no timber at or near the ford.

The fair girl was not afflicted with more superstition than the average, but she had now strange feelings, such as had never before ruled her brain.

Scenes of horror, in which her father figured as a victim of hideous fiends. Presentiments of coming evil to her loved and only parent, to Charles Chase, and to herself—these filled her mind, and rushed into her brain beyond her control. She feared that she was about to be ill, and sunk back against the trunk of a

tree. Her wealth of wavy hair fluttered amid the brilliant wild flowers and delicate tiny vines that surrounded her. As she thus reclined, her eyelids closed, and her long lashes drooping over her cheeks, now pale in her imaginary terror—as she thus reclined in graceful abandon, amid the rich verdure of the dense tropic growth, she seemed indeed too fair, too pure for vulgar eyes to gaze upon. So had she ever been. Gay and laughing, without a frown or cloud upon her brow or mind—this had been her way through life, and had made her to be beloved by all.

No central, prominent figure in a mid-summer's dream could be more fair, more angelic.

The air around her seemed purer and more intoxicating; the flowers were brighter of hue, and sweeter of perfume; the songs of birds more melodious, because she was near.

But, for all this, she was sad, and her very sadness—so unusual a thing—made her but the lovelier.

It was not strange that Fort Belknap had become less dismal to the denizens of that forlorn frontier station since Stella had blessed it by her presence. The rough borderers had become more cautious in their speech and more polite in their manners. The ignorant border-women thought twice before they spoke in her presence, and even glanced in their mirrors, and arranged their dresses and tangled hair when they heard her voice, or saw her tripping past their doors. The poor and needy received help from her hands, in a roundabout way, but they knew the source, nevertheless. Kind words and deeds marked her footsteps wherever she went.

She tried to-day to throw off her depression. She strove to laugh at her own foolish fears, and reasoned that the brave Belknap Boys would not allow her father to come to harm. Her fears, she argued, were absurd and childish. A score of good men and true, all inured to frontier life—surely her father was safe in such company. With this thought she became more calm; and soon, lulled by the gentle zephyr, and the rippling waters at her feet, she fell asleep there in the wild wood.

But, had she known that all her dread surmises were as nothing to the actual dangers through which her parent was now passing; had she known that, even now, he was flying for life chased by a horde of fiendish Comanches, that while she thus peacefully slept he had dashed headlong upon his horse into a yawning chasm—had she known all this, she would be now, young and delicate girl though she was, riding upon the fleetest horse at the fort to his rescue, braving torture and death, ay, even worse than these, to save him, instead of thus reposing calmly in the Brazos bottom!

But in mercy poor human beings are often kept ignorant of what they cannot remedy, and Stella slept on—slept on for two long hours; slept until just across the stream, amid the undergrowth, a crashing of bush and branch, and the floundering and snorting of a frightened horse awakened her, and she arose, at first somewhat alarmed, not knowing for a moment where she was.

While she thus sat, a mustang, frantic and maddened, broke from the bushes into a clear space directly opposite, and upon the steed sat a war-painted brave, his hand grasping the mane of his mustang, the jaw-strap flying wild.

Down the bare breast of the warrior ran streams of blood from a wound in his shoulder, while the same trickled from his long, black hair from another in his head. As this dread sight met the view of Stella Stearns, she sprang to her feet, causing the mustang to bound quickly to one side and then dash away from the river toward the thick timber and undergrowth again.

This sudden turn of his steed caused the red rider to be thrown over to one side of his horse, where for a moment he clung with desperate clutch, but as the mustang reared upward to plunge back into the wood, the warrior fell heavily to the earth, and Stella, pale as a corpse, stood like a statue upon the flowery bank, unable to move a muscle.

Surging back into her brain came her former fears, and her heart almost stilled its beating, as she realized that the wounded Indian had come from up the Brazos—from the very direction in which her father had gone to hunt. But how came he here?

There was no explanation from his condition, except that he had been shot by the

minute-men with whom her father was. There must have been a fight, and her father may have been killed. But, no—it could not be! God would not surely take her only parent from her. She could not, she would not believe that the fates would be so cruel to her.

Then came an unaccountable desire to look upon the fallen brave, to know if he were dead; a fascination, which she was powerless to combat, drawing her over the river. The warrior was a human being after all. He was wounded and alone, without care, it might be dying—perhaps dead—and terrible as had been his appearance, she resolved to cross the stream, and satisfy herself as to his condition. If he still lived he must be weak from the loss of blood, and could not harm her.

The waving grass hid his form from view, and the thought that he might be suffering nerved her to action, as it had stirred her sympathetic heart.

Some little distance above where she was a large tree had fallen from the bank across the stream, its huge limbs reaching, and twining in with the undergrowth beyond the river. To this Stella quickly ran, and in her excitement rushed forward where, at another time, she would have been afraid to venture. With pallid face and staring eyes, she tore through the bushes until she gained the clear space opposite her former position, and advanced toward the spot where the warrior had fallen.

She peered over the heads of the tall grass, and came to an abrupt halt, as the outstretched and hideous form of the Indian met her startled view. He was motionless, and seemingly dead, but, in spite of her fear and aversion, Stella advanced, and stooping over, gazed at the red-man's breast. She saw that his heart was beating, that his eyes were closed, and his teeth set, and she knew that the brave still lived.

Back to the river she ran, tore several bunches of green moss from the stones beneath the surface of the water, and then returning to the side of the sufferer, she laid the spongelike plant upon his breast.

Slowly the painted lids opened, and the black eyes, now dimmed by the loss of blood, gazed in wonder upon the fair girl who was attending him in his sad condition, with a look of pity and compassion in her startled eyes that, savage though he was, he could not fail to interpret aright.

Bloodstained and fiendish in appearance was the Comanche, and yet Stella Stearns could not leave him thus in his helplessness and agony to die. She felt sure that any of the men of the town would, if they discovered the Indian, plunge a knife in his breast, or else hang him; she therefore resolved to procure bandages, stimulants, and everything that was necessary, and attend to the sufferer's wants, unknown to any one.

Not considering that the brave could not understand a word that she said, Stella addressed him:

"Lie still, and I will get something for you. Be patient, poor fellow; I will return soon."

With all speed, the young girl darted back to their apartments and procured from her father's medicine-chest, brandy, bandages and salves, taking also bread and meat from the pantry, without the knowledge of the landlady, and as she hastened back with her basket in the direction from which she had come, none who saw her thought it strange, for they had often seen her thus going on a solitary picnic, carrying her food in the same basket.

When she again crossed the river and reached the side of the Indian his eyes were languidly fixed upon the sky, and seemed almost sightless, not a movement betraying that he was aware of her presence by his side.

Stella at once poured some brandy into his mouth, which the warrior swallowed, and his eyes then began to brighten. She then, with the damp moss, removed the blood and paint from his face, head and shoulders.

She now discovered that a bullet had entered near the collar bone and passed through and out at his back, but without apparently breaking any bone, and had not been low enough down to have pierced his lungs. The wound in the head was from a glance shot, and therefore the brave had only been weakened from loss of blood. Stella at once applied salve to the wounds and bandaged them, giving the warrior another dose of brandy when she had finished. All the while the Indian kept gazing at her in speechless wonder.

After the face of the brave had been bathed

and the paint and blood removed his features were shown to be youthful, and not half as hideous as before.

Stella placed the basket of food by his side, and placing some bread and buffalo-meat in his hands, held up the bottle of brandy to his view. She then laid it in the basket, where he could easily help himself.

This done, she gathered a quantity of soft moss from the thicket and placed it under his head; but at this moment she heard the sound of many hoofs across the river approaching the spring, and she knew that the hunting-party must be returning.

Waving her hand in farewell to the silent brave, Stella bounded away, and passing through the timber ran over the sands toward the town.

The minute-men had reached the spring.

She could see them lift two helpless men from horse-litters, and her heart sprung to her throat. She rushed in among them, pushing them aside, her features pale as death, and she saw two of the Belknap Boys lying upon the earth, swollen and distorted with agony. She shot glances around the company of minute-men who appeared, oh, so strange to her!—but the one she sought was not with them. Again she scanned each face closely.

Then she cried out from her inmost soul, her face convulsed with the most terrible apprehension:

"Tell me! oh, tell me! where is my father?"

Silence ruled the little band, and in their faces she read the worst. Then, with a wild, piercing shriek of agony, wrung from her anguished heart, Stella Stearns fell senseless into the ready arms of Belknap Bill.

CHAPTER VII.

OUT OF THE MOUTH OF HELL.

"DOG-GONE my 'Merican heart!" whispered Single Eye, hoarsely. "Scrouge up clos'ter, boyees, an' listen. Ther red hellyuns can't see up this hyer tree, an' hit's ther last place they'd think o' looking. I'm dog-goned sorry an' sot back 'bout fotchin' yer up hyer, an' nigh ther cussed camp o' ther condemned kiotes!"

"Why?" asked Chase, in a whisper.

"Cuz thar is going ter be hellish doin's in thet openin' in a pesky short fletin' period o' time."

"What makes you think so?" was Chase's next question.

"I doesn't think so. I know hit. Fust off, ther cusses wouldn't be out o' thar blankets ef somethin' warn't up out o' ther usual run on a war-path. An' nex', I hes my peeper on somethin' what 'splains ther hull thing, an' talks plain 'Nited States ter Single Eye.

"What have you discovered?" inquired the youth.

"I see's somethin' what'll make yer shiver, when yer knows es much 'bout things es this ole perrarer dog does. Jist gaze toward ther north side o' ther camp an' yer'll see a white man—one o' Uncle Samwell's soldier-men—stretched out on ther grass an' hitched ter four stakes, kinder spread-eagle like. Kin yer see him?"

"Yes, I see him now," said Chase. "Can you see him, boys?"

"Yes!" came from the trembling lips of Wolfe and Fox.

"Waal, boyees, yer'll see him purty soon in a fix what'll make yer wish yer'd never left Bostin. Ther cowardly kiotes is goin' ter tortur' him, an' we-uns hes no show ter save his ha'r. I b'lieve hit'll do yer good ter see ther dev'lish work o' ther reds, an' l'arn yer all ter be mighty keerful o' yerselves while ye're on ther frontier, though hit's a bitter dose, I tell yer."

"I think we had better get out of this," said Wolfe. "The Indians may see us, and if they do, there is no escape."

"Yer needn't borper trouble 'bout thet, fer they hes a circus comin' on thet'll take up thar 'tention, an' they 'pends on ther two ha'r-t'arers they sent down crick ter guard ther camp from thet-a-way. Ef they knowed I'd tuck 'em in out o' ther wet, they'd s'arch ther bottom an' scatter braves over ther perrarer ter kerral us."

And now came a most terrible and heart-sickening scene, which throughout chained the attention of the appalled youths. They locked their legs under the huge limb of the tree, and grasping smaller branches with a vise-like grip, set their teeth and made ready to see the thing through, although they were sick as

death with horror and pity for the unfortunate victim.

The soldier was evidently one of the straggling escort of some Government wagon-train, who had been captured by the Indians; and as the spectators in the tree sat gazing downward, the wretched man was cut loose and jerked to his feet. His clothing was then torn from his body by a number of braves, who then led him to the middle of the camp, where a strong stake had been driven into the earth. With vengeful whoops they then tightly secured him to the stake. When this was done, the chief arose from the shadow of a tree on the west side of the opening, and stood erect in the center of his warriors.

The right side of his head was entirely free from hair, as were the heads of all the warriors present; it being the custom of this branch of the Comanche tribe, from childhood, to pluck out by the roots every hair upon that side, while upon the left it hung to the waist, and was plaited in with small silver ornaments, in the shape of plates, varying in size from that of a Mexican dollar to that of a dinner-plate, the latter being upon the head. The chief wore a silver crescent, depending from his neck by a chain; the Comanches observing each quarter of the moon with great ceremonies, both festive and religious. Eagle-feathers decorated his head, as a token of rank, and his leggins were richly embroidered—probably by the Mexican women whom they captured in their raids across the Rio Grande.

As the chief arose, his principal and most noted warriors gathered around him, and all advanced to the north side of the opening, when the braves, to the number of a hundred and forty, collected in the rear. Each carried in one hand either knife or hatchet, and in the other a flint stone, some three inches in length; a belt of these stones, some miles wide, and extending north and south for a long distance, being located near the border of the Llano Estacado, west of Fort Belknap.

The chief started in a circling course around the opening, his principal warriors following, and braves of lesser note being stationed, according to the number of scalps they had taken, in a single file, and all going in a pace very peculiar, and difficult of description.

It was half walk, and half shuffle—a spasmodic, nervous, movement, more like the motion of figures in a puppet show than aught else on earth.

The chief led, in a large circle; then, as he came near the extreme end of the procession, he turned toward, and approached the captive, whose face was ghastly, and stamped with hopeless despair.

The chief passed closely by the captive, as did all the long line of paint-daubed fiends, until the last one among them had reached the doomed man. Then the two least and youngest of the warriors broke from the line, seized him by the hair, and scalped him, jumping back into their places, and moving on with the others.

Only a portion of the skin which covers the skull, of about the size of a silver dollar, is taken by these Indians, and this does not destroy life, as many seem to suppose. Numbers of people on the borders of Texas have been thus scalped, and are now alive and well.

Again the circle of fiends marched around their victim as before, and the silence that had ruled all up to this time, except a yell from each of the young braves as they scalped the soldier, was now broken by a simultaneous and terrific war-whoop from every throat, all coming to a halt at the same instant.

A moment after the circuitous march was resumed, and then, as each red fiend came opposite the captive, he would give a wild screech, brandish hatchet or knife for an instant in the face of the unfortunate man, and then draw the sharp point of the flint across his body, penetrating the flesh just sufficient to cause the blood to ooze out. By the time the terrible circle had passed the poor sufferer, he presented a most appalling spectacle. Still, round and round went the demons, persisting in their hellish work, until the soldier's body seemed one mass of gore.

Groans of agony, such as only the most intense pains can wring from a human heart, burst from the quivering lips of the doomed man. Then the dread circle broke up, gathered in groups, lighted their pipes, and threw themselves upon the ground to smoke, laugh, and point their fingers in derision at the poor sufferer.

For full fifteen minutes this lasted, and the latter part of this time, pleading, prayerful words burst from the lips of the captive. Words and tones that might have melted a heart of iron broke from the tortured soul, as he writhed in intense agony; but this only caused the fiendish Comanches to laugh more loudly, and to redouble each jeer and taunt.

Again the hideous circle was formed; but stood in their tracks, while two of the braves sprung opposite the captive, striking into the war-dance, raising the war-song, advancing, receding, moving to the right, then to the left, occupying at least ten minutes in proceeding as many paces. Then they bounded immediately in front of the bleeding, mutilated captive, danced their hideous dance, drew their hatchets suddenly, and sent the glittering steel crashing through his skull. The fearful torture was at an end.

"Thank God, he is at rest at last!"

These words broke from Charles Chase as, filled with horror, he clung desperately to the limbs of the tree, sick as death, as were also Wolfe and Fox.

Much of the time that the awful proceedings had been in progress, the boys had been forced to press their hands over their eyes to shut out the horrible scene; and Single Eye had explained much of what transpired to them, although they knew enough from actual observation to satisfy them. They only wanted now to fly from the dread vicinity, and the old scout did not wonder at it.

There was no longer need to caution them in regard to making any noise; for the probability of capture by such inhuman monsters, should they create an alarm, was sufficient to cause them to creep like mice around a sleeping cat, the very beating of their hearts alarming them.

Single Eye, although appearing to be little affected by the scene of torture, and betraying nothing of his feelings in his whispered words to the boys, nevertheless suffered greatly, gripping tightly at the branch by which he held, while his teeth were clinched hard together. The brave old scout, as the torturing fiends tore into the flesh of the unhappy victim of Comanche cruelty, made fresh and most binding oaths of vengeance. He swore in his mind that a score of the "red hellyuns" should suffer death at his hands, in revenge for the cowardly torture of that poor boy "ev Uncle Samwell's." And the scout was one who would keep his oath.

It was with feelings of relief the most intense that the three horrified youths again mounted their horses, and sped away down-stream for a distance, and then again forded the river, passing up, under cover of the timber, some five miles beyond the camp of the Indians. Here they again forded, Single Eye hitching a lariat to the neck of each pack-mule, giving the end of one to Chase, and taking the other himself, then fastening the same to the horn of his saddle, and bidding the young man do likewise.

This done, the old scout desired Fox and Wolfe to ride behind the mules and urge the animals on.

Thus prepared, with Single Eye and Charles Chase in the front, with the mules in lead, and Wolfe and Fox bringing up the rear, they all drove spurs to their horses, heading north toward the Elm Fork of the Brazos, and galloped as though the fiends of Hades were on their trail; and, for aught they knew, such might be the case.

CHAPTER VIII.

BEAUTY ON THE TRAIL.

THE minute-men of Young county had ridden nearly twenty miles before they engaged in the fierce fight with the largely superior body of Indians, from whom they had so providentially escaped through an exceedingly well-arranged ambush.

The cool daring and reckless bravery of these border heroes had saved them from total annihilation; for, had the Indians succeeded in getting between the whites and their horses, then surrounded them, and forced them from cover at the point of the lance, there would have been no hope. Not one could have escaped instant death, or protracted torture.

Having the greatest confidence in their leader, Belknap Bill, who had been a noted scout on the Texas border, and was well acquainted with Indian wiles and character from his boyhood, as were also many of the command—this was all that saved them, for Bill

saw at a glance where advantage could be taken, where danger most threatened, and gave his orders accordingly, and in as cool a manner as if he was conducting a herd of bees. A single misconception of the intention of the Comanches, a moment's delay in any one of their volleys, would have insured their defeat; although, knowing the fate in store for them, they would have fought to the last like demons.

They regained their horses, however, and escaped amid the smoke that filled the dense bottom, and while the Indians were maddened and demoralized by their losses; but they had not galloped a mile before the two wounded men pulled rein, and all saw in a moment that something was wrong.

"What's ther difficult' wi' yer, boyees?" asked Belknap Bill, anxiously. "Does ther pesky arrer wounds bother yer?"

"I don't know how 'tis with Tom," one of them replied; "but I'm a goner, sure es shootin'. Thet arrer what struck inter me war poisoned, fer I'm sick es a hen wi' ther pip, an' my arm's a-swellin' fast. Does yer feel jist so, Jim?"

"Thet's jist my condish," answered Jim, dubiously. "I'm booked fer a hard death, I reckon; an' I war a-thinkin' 'bout what 'ud come o' my woman and babies. Fact air, I hes bin suff'rin' ever since 'bout ten minutes arter ther cussed stick went through my loose meat, and stuck inter my saddle."

"Hes any o' ye gut any whisky?" asked Bill, quickly.

"Hyer's a canteen full o' bug-juice what I hedn't time ter pass roun'. Drink 'bout half o' hit, Tom; an' Jim swaller t'other half right off, quick as yer kin."

Thus spoke one of the command, as he passed the canteen, and both the wounded men drank hastily, as directed.

Belknap Bill quickly slashed the clothing from the wounds of each, saying as he did so:

"Some o' yer see ef yer kin hunt up some rattlesnake weed, quick es yer kin; an' all o' yer put in fresh chaws o' terbac'. Git 'em saterated, an' then pass ther chaws ter me!"

Bill quickly tore a blanket into strips, and one of the men, at this moment, came running from a rocky bank near at hand, with a weed, the underside of the leaf of which was mottled and marked much in the same way as the skin of the pest of the prairies. These leaves were quickly pounded into pulp, and placed directly upon the wounds, from which now issued a greenish slimy matter; and then, the tobacco, which had been prepared as directed, was bound around and over the pulp, and securely tied with buckskin strings.

The two men were now wild, from the large amount of liquor they had drank; and Bill detailed four others, one to ride on each side of them, to support them upon their horses.

Thus they proceeded, as fast as was possible under the circumstances, but were again forced to stop, and construct two litters, upon which they bound the now insane sufferers.

They eventually arrived at the spring at the base of the bluff, where, as we have seen, their anguish was doubled by the appearance and fainting of her they so much loved—Stella Stearns. As soon she came running toward them, they felt sure at once that her father had been killed or taken captive; for the actions and words of Stella proved that he had not returned to Fort Belknap.

Had he escaped the Indians, he would have been in the town long previous to their arrival; for they had been long delayed by the care of the wounded and from traveling, on their account, along the cool shades of the bottom timber.

As Stella fainted, a stream of women and children came rushing down the trail from the town to the spring, and among them the wives of the two wounded men.

Then the air was filled with cries of anguish, as the swollen sufferers were recognized by their dear ones, and by the sight of Stella, apparently dead in the arms of Belknap Bill. All clung about her, wild with grief.

"Hes none o' yer see'd Mister Stearns?" asked Bill. "Wish't I war a-fightin' reds ag'in. Hit 'ud be more 'greeable biz then ter see sich a heap o' misery 'bout home."

No one had seen the invalid lawyer since the morning.

"Reckon," said Bill, "he's a goner. Ef he'd a-stayed with we-'uns, he'd bin a power o' trouble, but we'd 'a' fatched him through. Folkses, this hyer circus'll kill our leetle gal,

an' knock all ther sunshine out o' ther burg. Boyees, I ain't wo'th shucks fer a while, but when I gits a leetle composed, I'll change; and then I'm a dead open an' shut roarer, ready ter buck ag'in' chain lightnin' an' ther hull Comanche nation, ter git satisfaction fer this day's work."

With these words, Belknap Bill caught up Stella, and stalked through the crowd of weeping women and children, on up the trail, and into the town, to which also the two poisoned men were carried, and where they received every attention.

Bill took Stella to her own apartment, into which he had never been before; and indeed, he had never in his life seen such exquisite and elegant appointments. The rough walls and ceiling were hidden from view by handsome draperies, tasteful pictures and a hundred and one little ornaments, so artistically placed and arranged that there would seem to be no "crowding," even in the eye of the most fastidious.

The landlady came bustling up the stairs with camphor, cologne, hartshorn, and numberless other remedies for fainting, all great and expensive luxuries in that border town.

"Now, Bill, you git!" she exclaimed. "This hain't no place for men-folkses"—for "Marm" Dean had a sense of the proprieties.—"I'll take keer o' Miss Stella, an' I sh'ud suppose yer'd be whoopin' up a few o' ther boys ter skute West ag'in, an' try an' resky Mister Stearns, ef he's bin an' gut tuck by ther red heathen. I shill go plum crazy ef he's scu'ped an' tortur'd, fer he war a gentleman o' ther XXX sort, what always paid his way. An' 'sides thet, ther sight o' Stella pinin' 'way wi' grief 'ud kill me, er war ther meat offen my bones; an' I'd sooner be dead an' planted decently, than be a walkin' skellerton like ole maid Harris. Lord 'a' massy! I do declar' she looks as though she war gone dead sore, an' waitin' fer ther funeral. I'm so flustered, I ain't 'sponserble fer nothin'."

Bill waited to hear no more, but gave one last look at the face of Stella Stearns, and then passed slowly down the stairs, as if all his life, hopes and aims were blasted.

Next to the "hotel," in which the rooms of Stella and her father were located, was the principal bar-room of the town, and here all the minute men gathered to "recuperate," after their wounded comrades had been taken in charge by the man in the "variety" business. As Belknap Bill passed out into the street, he was called by one of his men into the bar to take a drink, and to discuss with the company the situation of affairs in connection with the capture of Stearns; many of the old men and youths of the burg dropping in to ask questions, and to get the details of the fight, and the exact location of the field of conflict.

Marm Dean applied restoratives without stint, her tongue running like a Yankee shuttle meanwhile, in soliloquy, and she soon had the satisfaction of seeing the eyes of Stella open, with an expression of amazed surprise in their depths. But a moment, however, was this expression mirrored from mind to eye, for all the dread happenings of the previous day burst, like an overwhelming avalanche of dread anguish upon her brain.

Lying silent and motionless, her eyes filled with a hopeless despair that was painful to witness, Marm Dean was so frightened that she proceeded at once to administer an opiate. Setting it upon a stand within easy reach of Stella, she said:

"Drink that, dearie, an' hit'll soothe yer nerves. I know I ain't fit fer a nuss—I talk too much. But, Lordy gracious! I can't help hit. I war borned that way, an' yer mought es well try ter dam up ther Brazos, es ter hobble my tongue. I'll skute, an' I know yer'll take hit arter I'm outen ther way. Yer needn't ter worry 'bout yer father, fer he'll come out all right. Ef ther boys don't go back arter him, I'll go myself in ther mornin'. Take yer med'sun, thet's a dearie; an' then say yer pra'rs, compose yerself, an' go ter sleep. I won't bother yer no more ter-night."

As Marm Dean brought her remarks to a close, she reached the foot of the stairway, opened the door to enter the dining room, then turned and added:

"I'll drap in on yer bime-by, Stella, an' see how yer gittin' 'long. Reckon I'll run over now, an' see how ther boys is what war poisoned wi' ther pesky arrers."

As the landlady closed the door with a somewhat loud slam, Stella sprung from her bed,

her eyes filled with a strange, wild light, and rushed to a closet, from which she took a side-saddle, which her father had purchased for her in St. Louis, together with a bridle and blanket. She looked out at the window toward the rear of the hotel, but no one was in view. Quickly she threw out the horse equipments, and ran down the stairs, passing out of the rear door of the dwelling.

Stopping for a moment, she heard the loud conversation of the minute men in the bar-room, and thinking she might learn something in regard to her father, which they had concealed from her, she listened silently, crouching beneath the window, her senses doubly acute from her nervous state of mind. It so happened that one of the men was just informing a questioner of the details of the day's doings; and he described, rather graphically, the route and position of the Indians, and the distance and direction of the point at which Mr. Stearns had last been seen. The man was more minute in the details than he would have been had he been perfectly sober.

The night was quite dark, it having been the hour of sunset when the Belknap boys returned; but the young girl knew every turn and crook of the town, and she made her way to an old deserted log-house, that Bill had used as a stable for his best horses.

She carried her saddle and bridle with her, and selecting a magnificent black horse, which was noted for its speed, she led the animal out, mounted, and ambled slowly out of the town by a round-about way, avoiding the dwellings. When near the spring, she headed west, and galloped wildly along the border of the timber.

On, on, sped the fair girl, dressed in spotless white, upon the black steed, through the dark tropic night, toward the haunts of savage beasts, and far more merciless and savage human beings.

Still on, filled with an insane desire to go to her father, let him be alive or dead; and, naturally timid, and far from being self-reliant, she now felt, in her wild excitement, no fear of the dread dangers to which she was hastening, for her brain was seared and confused by an anguish and grief that was almost beyond human comprehension.

On sped the flying hoofs of the black steed, swishing through the grass, the sinewy animal, intoxicated by its freedom and the fresh air of the night, speeding like the wind; but at last, as the moon arose, and Stella saw the vast plain outstretched before her, after nearly a twenty miles gallop, and discovered the dark timber line of the creek that entered into the Clear Fork, she knew that she was now nearing the point at which her father had been last seen, and where she might come suddenly upon his dead and mutilated body—then she clasped her hands above her head in pleading prayer, that God would lead her to her parent, and that she might find him alive.

But, as the concluding words of that earnest and soul-drawn petition left her lips, and she again gazed ahead over the now moonlit plain, her heart sprung to her throat, her blood seemed to congeal in her veins, and she trembled violently as she clutched at her saddle for support—for, coming from the dark shades of the timber of the Clear Fork, yelling like fiends, and lashing their mustangs, on to intercept her, rode two-score of painted savages, their long hair and plumes of feathers flaunting wildly in the wind of their rapid ride.

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT THEY SAW.

SINGLE EYE and Chase proceeded in an easy lope, having the pack-mules in lead, while Fox and Wolfe urged their animals on from the rear until the old scout decided that it would be impossible to keep up such speed without breaking down the mules, and being forced to leave them on the plain. A short halt was therefore made, and nearly their entire stock of provisions was thrown out of the kiacke, reserving only sufficient to last them until they could reach Fort Belknap.

They then went on, Single Eye feeling sure that the war-party, upon discovering that the two braves sent down the river to guard them against surprises from that quarter had been made 'way with, would follow their trail filled with vengeful fury.

The scout knew that the war-party was returning from a raid down country, or they would not have had a United States soldier as captive. He also reasoned that the Indians

would strike out in the morning toward Fort Belknap, or the Clear Fork, in order to follow the stream as far west as was possible toward their villages, and pack their extra animals with buffalo-meat.

He knew that they were in danger, and that the sooner they reached the fort the better; although he refrained from alarming his youthful proteges.

The little party reached Elm Fork two hours after sunrise the next morning, and encamped in a secluded opening, where they rested for some hours; Single Eye frequently going to the southern border of the timber, and climbing a tree, to gaze out over the plain, in order to ascertain if the Comanches were approaching on the trail.

The old scout saw no indications of them; however he, knowing at what time the moon arose, timed his travel accordingly, aware that the lynx eyes of the red-men would detect them as easily by moonlight as by daylight. Had he been alone, or with experienced prairie men, he would not have been so particular; but he felt a heavy responsibility was resting upon him, in the care of the youths who had engaged him as their guide.

The Clear Fork was safely reached, Single Eye striking the river just below the scene of the fight between the Minute-men and Comanches, some six hours after the terrible struggle had ended.

It was quite dark, but the old scout, although he had but one eye, boasted that he could see in the night as well as an owl, and he at once led the boys into the black depths of the timber, to a small clear space, entirely surrounded by dense thickets.

No sooner had the party halted, and were about to remove the equipments from their animals, than they became aware that some strange sounds were breaking the stillness of the night, proceeding from up the stream, at no great distance from their position.

"Wa-al, I hopes ter be stomped ter death by cotton-tailed rabbits ef ther hull dang'd country ain't es thick wi' reds es a chap'rell mule's neck wi' wood-ticks?"

These words burst from Single Eye, in utter amazement.

"Those sounds don't appear to be Indian yells," said Chase.

"They ain't a-yellin'. They is a-howlin', an' a-dancin' their death dance. Boyees, we hes slosed right inter chain lightin' biz, an' hes gut ter go slow, an' watch out clost, er lose ha'r," was the remark of the scout.

"I'm ready for them," asserted Chase; for, since he had witnessed the dastardly torture of the unfortunate soldier, the youth had felt like shooting down every brave among the bloody Comanches, without mercy.

"What is the state of your feelings on the subject, boys?" he continued.

"I'm desperately inclined that way," answered Wolfe; "although I must admit that I don't care about making a charge into such a large party as we left at Pecan Bayou."

"You can chalk me down for a few straight shots," said Fox; "but if they run in too thick, I won't promise to stand my ground. Do you suppose, Single Eye, that they belong to the same tribe that tortured that poor soldier?"

"Ya as, thar ther same sort o' hellyuns. We're on Curmanch' huntin' grounds, an' hit sounds lively et thet."

The four men now untied their blankets, spread them on the grass, and stretched out to rest; that is, the younger members of the party, Single Eye bidding them go to sleep, and he would guard the camp. But the unearthly howls up the river were enough to banish sleep, although they had been without rest for some thirty-six hours.

"Do you think the Indians have had a fight?" asked Chase.

"I'm dead sure on hit," was the old scout's reply.

"Perhaps the Comanches and Apaches have come in contact."

"Hit may be; but I air purty well satisfied that some o' ther Belknap boyees hes bin out arter buffler, an' hes run ag'in' a war-party o' reds."

"Do you suppose that the Indians we saw on Pecan Bayou will advance in this direction, and join them?"

"I hain't ther leastest doubt 'bout hit. Ther two crowds 'il run tergether, an' ef they air strong enough may run in on Fort Belknap an' kill a heap o' folkses."

"How do you know that these are not Apaches?"

"'Cos I kin tell by ther yells an' howls. Thar ain't no two big tribes in 'Meriky what hes ther same. They hes everything 'bout 'em diff'runt. They all lays ther sticks diff'runt when they builds a fire even. They dances diff'runt. They buries diff'runt. An' nary two on 'em b'lieves in goin' same trail ter t'other world. Dang me, ef thar ain't ther moon, boyees, an' I'm p'ison glad! When she gits up a leetle higher, we'll gaze roun', ef ye're inclernated thet-a-way."

The opening had now become less dark, enabling the young men to see the outlines of the animals; and they now proceeded to satisfy their hunger, while they waited patiently.

"Now, boyees," said the old scout, with an air of great satisfaction; "I'm ready fer biz. This single peeper o' mine hes ter do double duty from sun-up ter sun-down, an' purty consider'ble biz through ther dark, gin'rally speakin'; but I hes larn't hit ter git along wi' short rations an' sleep. Fust off, arter I lost hits mate, I hed ter prop ther lids, an' snap terbae' dust inter hit, ter keep hit open, an' save my scalp; but es I said, hit's purty well broke in now. Fox an' Wolfe, kin yer take keer o' camp, ontill me an' Chase sashays 'bout a bit, ter 'vestergate things gin'rally?"

"Yes," replied Fox; "I'm agreeable. What do you say, Wolfe?"

"I'm willing to do as Single Eye desires, in all things. Our lives depend upon him, and we must rely on his judgment. I consider myself under his orders, and obey implicitly."

"'Nough said!" was the abrupt reply. "We-uns won't take our long shooters, Chase. Our sixes an' bowies must take us through, fer thar is too much brush-crawlin' ter do, ter tote rifles. So long, boyees!"

So saying, Single Eye glided into the undergrowth in the direction of the river, followed by Charles; the light that now pierced the foliage being sufficient to enable them to progress without trouble. The river was soon reached, and crossed by means of the entangled limbs which formed an archway over it; and they proceeded on through the bottom timber toward the open plain.

"I doesn't propose ter t'ar all my togs off," said the old scout, "jist ter see a Curmanch' fandango over a passel o' defuncated red hellyuns. We-uns kin git on ther edge o' ther timber, an' glide up in ther shade 'thout bein' s'ed, I reckon. Slide yer knife an' shooters 'roun' in front, handy ter grip, an' watch out ter see which way I skutes ef ther Kiotes jumps us. We're on a dang'd dangerous trail, yer kin jist gamble heavy on that; an' we hes gut ter be putty sharp. Ther dang'd Curmanches, since ther Texans gut Colt's fast shooters, an' ther 'Paches too, p'isons thar arrers, an' ef pilgrim gits one inter his skin, he'd better say, 'Now I lay me' gol-darned fast, fer he won't hev time 'tween groans an' yells, arter he 'gins ter swell up. Hit's a condemned mean way o' fightin' but hit's a way they hes. Howsom-ever, hyer we air, plum chuck up ag'in' open natur'."

As the scout brought his remarks to an end, Chase, with his hands stretched out to guard his face from the branches, which were moved from place to place by Single Eye, as the latter pressed through them, saw that the vast wide plain lay outspread before him, and extended as far north as the eye could reach, now illuminated by the moon, which was almost as bright as day.

"That's a purty sight, Chase," said the old scout, "but hit's thunderin' dangerous in this part o' Uncle Samwell's pastur' lan's. Ef a pilgrim air ketched by reds on a big open like thet, an' hain't gut XXX hoss-meat under him, he'd better empty his shooters ter ther bestest 'vantage, 'ceptin' one shot, then call on ther Ormighty ter fergive all his back actions an' 'scuse his crooked trails, an' put a "blue-whistler" through ther bestest bizness part o' his anertomical make-up; fer he's dead sure ter furnish ther 'musement fer a fust class Curmanch' pic-nic an' barbecue combined. Wa-al, I doesn't freeze my peeper onter anythin' till yit—nary thing what crawls, walks, flies, er rides. Does yer notice anythin' on ther move?"

"No. I have discovered nothing. There is only a vast sea of grass, motionless as death, and with nothing alive upon its level surface. But what is that dark line, winding out from the stream northward, and away toward the west? Is it an immense herd of buffalo?"

"Nary buffler. Hit's ther timber of a crick what runs inter this hyer Cl'ar Fork; an' bit ain't fur off either, but just 'pears ter be, 'cos ther night air a leetle hazy."

"I haven't looked eastward, Single Eye. Let us get past that clump of bushes, and see what there is in that direction."

"We-uns ain't interested thet-a-way, Chase. Ther reds don't come from toward Belknap, by a jug-full. Don't yer fret."

Before the old scout had ceased speaking, Charles had broken his way through a thicket that grew clear of the timber, and shut out from their position the eastern view.

Single Eye followed; but, before he reached the side of Chase, he heard an ejaculation of intense surprise from the young man. He turned around on the instant.

"What in thunderation he's struck yer? What does yer diskiver?"

"Great Heavens, Single Eye! Come quick!" he exclaimed.

Grasping the scout by the shoulder, Chase drew him to his side, saying, in a hoarse whisper of astonishment:

"Look, man, look!" pointing with his finger. "Is that an Indian squaw? No. It cannot be—the face is white, ghastly white! What does it mean?"

"By ther bleed o' ther Alamo victims! What does thet gal mean, ridin' thet-a-way. She's crazy es a loon; an' her ha'r'll be on a Curmanch' belt afore an hour. We can't help her. Hit ain't sot down in ther book!"

From the eastward, toward Fort Belknap, a quarter of a mile from the timber in which the spectators in the tree sat gazing downward, our friends were secreted, and nearly abreast of their position, dashed at headlong speed a night black horse, and upon it, a young girl, dressed in some soft white fabric, her face almost as white as her costume, her hair unconfined, and flying wildly.

Chase sprung free of the bushes, and from his lips broke forth a ringing yell of mingled alarm and amazement, as the strange equestrienne darted toward the north.

"What ther dickens is ther matter wi' yer, Chase? We-uns is boun' ter git our heads skinned, ef yer doesn't look sharp. Reckon she's gut ther nightmar', ther wo'stest kind."

But Charles Chase heeded not the words of his old friend. He bent forward for an instant, and then straightening himself erect, he clapped his hands upon his forehead, and reeled in his tracks, while his features were contorted with the most poignant anguish, as he cried out bitterly:

"Great God, be merciful! Oh, Heaven protect her! Stella, my darling, you are doomed—you are doomed to a fate worse than death! But I will share it with you!"

He staggered for a moment, like a man stricken with palsy; then, grasping the hilt of his bowie in one hand, and the butt of his revolver in the other, he jerked the weapons, braced himself, and sprung for the open plain. But Single Eye was upon him, and with dexterous movement, hurled him to the earth, grasping him tightly by the wrists.

Thus he held the desperately struggling youth for some moments, and then allowed him to raise his head above the grass, exclaiming as he did so:

"Look west, Chase!"

The youth obeyed, with his soul in his eyes, and then cried:

"Oh, Heaven! Save, protect my darling, my own Stella! Let me loose, Single Eye! I shall fight them to the death—ay, even though they were a thousand strong!"

What was it they next beheld?

The fair girl, on her black steed, was flying, like an arrow shot from a bow, across the moonlit plain toward the west; while, from the cover of the timber to the south, speeding to intercept her, was a horde of yelling, war-painted Comanches!

CHAPTER X.

THE DUEL IN THE SINK-HOLE.

HENRY STEARNS lay senseless until after the moon had risen and illuminated the pit, which had, although he had suffered dread terrors therein, saved him, in all probability, from instant death at the hands of the pursuing Comanches. His brain was weak, from having been overtaxed for years past by the intricate and extensive legal business in which he had been engaged, and, as at his previous return to consciousness, when rendered senseless by the sudden plunge into the dark abyss, he did not

realize his position. A portion of the west side of the "sink-hole" was now brightly lit up by the moon, and the remainder was rendered so light that every object within was distinctly discernible.

The bewildered man sat in the south-west corner, the line of moonlight being directly above his head, while he cast glances around him in the utmost fear and wonder.

His awakening to sense seemed to him like a horrible dream more than a reality, but as he saw the form of his dead horse the circumstances that followed after his disastrous chase of the buffalo slowly returned to his mind, and the last dreadful fright that had, through the terror it induced, banished all sense, feeling and action, plunging him into a black oblivion, came back to him.

He remembered the two fiery eyes that burned into his very soul from out the previous darkness, and his brain began again to reel, a shudder of horror convulsing his frame, as he recalled the slow approach of those burning orbs to his very face, burning into his own overstrained eyes and holding them in a fixed stare by a fascination beyond his control.

Then he recollected that the cold, clammy nose of the horrible beast, the species of which he could not determine, had been thrust into his face, freezing the very blood in his veins with the most fearful horror at the thought.

In the flitting instant that he retained sense, and by a superhuman effort had endeavored to get upon his feet and shoot the beast, he had expected to be torn to pieces and devoured. Never again should he see Stella, his beloved and only child. Never again should they stroll together in the public gardens and around the pond in the Boston Common! It must all end here and now.

But this time he realized that he had been providentially preserved on two occasions, and he began to take courage.

Where was that terrible beast? Surely neither human nor brute could scale that fifteen-foot wall of perpendicular earth, without assistance from above with ropes or ladders.

As he now gazed at the wall to the north, it seemed in one place to move, and he sprung to his feet, straining his eyes toward the point that attracted his attention. Again he saw the outlines of an animal, which stood facing the north wall. He detected the slight movement of a long tail, with a bushy tuft at its end.

Drawing his revolver, Stearns stepped carefully over the dead body of his horse, and the new position gave him a partial side view of the beast that had been the cause of such dread and horror. To his great surprise he now discovered that the animal had horns, and a little further scrutiny showed him that it was a buffalo bull. He knew that there was no danger of being devoured by that species of beast, but there was a possibility of the bull's dashing upon him and piercing him with those short black horns.

He now knew why he had not before observed the bison, for its body was of a dun color, corresponding with the wall itself, its thin, summer coat of hair being dead, as it was near the shedding season on the southern range.

As his eyes became more accustomed to the darker portion of the chasm, he saw that the buffalo was but a skeleton, every bone bulging out and projecting, while the skin was drawn tightly over it. The legs of the animal were spread, as if the more easily to retain a standing position, and at times they moved from side to side and seemed to tremble and quiver.

Stearns knew from this that he had nothing to fear in that quarter, for the bison had doubtless been many days in the sink-hole, and was dying from starvation.

Feelings of pity ruled his mind when he saw the condition of the poor brute, and he moved onward that he might get a nearer view. As he reached the corner of the pit the bull became aware of his presence, and slowly turned its quivering head toward him. In spite of the fact that he now knew what the beast was, Stearns was forced to shudder as those terrible eyes were again bent upon his own. Their expression told him plainly that, were it not so weakened, the bull would quickly plunge upon him and gore him to death, and he was not sure that, in its frenzy, it might not yet attack him.

It would be a mercy to kill the animal, but he dared not shoot lest he might betray himself to the Indians.

At the same time he felt that he could have no peace of mind until the animal was dead. He knew that the days were now intensely hot, and that the carcass of his horse would soon decay and poison the air, and he felt that, unless by some means he should be enabled to reach the plain above, a horrible death awaited him—a death from starvation and thirst.

But his canteen of water was still secured to his saddle, and he now sprung eagerly toward his horse to ascertain if it had escaped being broken in the headlong plunge he had made; but, to his joy, he found it safe, and filled with the precious fluid upon which his life might now depend.

The bison did not turn, as he had expected, but kept its position, still moving its trembling head.

Stearns took a draught of water, for his throat seemed on fire and his lips were parched. He seated himself upon the saddle, it being still buckled to the dead horse, and, scanning the sides of the chasm, began calculating his chances of escape from it.

There was a long lariat attached to the neck of his horse and coiled at the saddle-horn. He felt sure that he could make a noose and cast the same some distance out on the plain above, for it was not more than thirty feet long; but he knew that there was no stone, or bush, or snag, over which the noose might, by accident, be cast, and thus afford him a chance to climb to the plain, if his strength would hold out.

There was, then, no way of escape, and he became hopeless.

He well knew that, if the minute-men should outrun the Comanches, and reach Fort Belknap, upon finding that he had not returned they would risk anything in the search for him; but he hardly dared think of his daughter, for, in his mind, he imagined her almost insane anguish at losing her only protector in the world.

The men under Belknap Bill had been forced to dash through the timber of the creek before the headlong charge of some two hundred braves before the small party of warriors had left the main body to pursue him, and consequently the minute-men did not know whether he had been discovered by the Indians or not; but from his absence they would suppose he had been either killed or captured. He had eaten nothing since the previous morning; but he had matches with him, and a fire might be kindled with the fat of his horse, while steaks cut from the hams of the animal would make a palatable and nourishing meal. However, there was a strong objection to a fire, for the smoke would be sufficient to betray him to the red fiends. He was ravenously hungry, but not hungry enough as yet to eat raw horse-meat.

Suddenly he became aware that a strange, rumbling sound was on the plain above him; and, by intently listening, he was satisfied that he heard Indian yells.

These sounds approached the chasm, and he felt that he must inevitably be discovered and butchered like a dog—that the demons would surround the pit, and fill his body with their terrible arrows!

The sounds came nearer and nearer, and inexperienced though he was in border life, he decided that a single horse was far ahead, and nearer to him than the body of horsemen who caused the deeper rumble, and gave the yells.

It must be, he felt, that some one was being pursued by the Indians, as he himself had been; and fearing that, whoever it was, he would dash into the sink-hole, Stearns crouched on the east side of the same, behind the body of his horse, for the sounds of approach were from that quarter, and a horse coming at full speed, would strike near the west wall. The line of moonlight was now nearer the bottom of the chasm; and, by looking along the north and west verge of it, the upper air was brilliantly illuminated.

In a very short time a horse came near the verge, and Stearns could hear its labored panting. He trembled with excitement, and gazed upward with a fixed stare that pained him. He dared not so much as wink to relieve the severe tension. The horse came thundering on, directly toward the pit, or so it seemed, at least, to the intensely excited listener.

His suspense was short; but the sight which, for a flitting instant, flashed before his eyes, plunged him into a hell of anguish, to which all his previous dread experiences were as nothing.

A coal black steed, flecked with foam, and panting with exertion, flew in a wild bound directly across the northwest corner of the

sink-hole, its hind hoofs, in that fearful bound, just clearing the void, and striking the edge of the pit, spurning a mass of earth backward, into the deep, yawning gap.

With a grunt of pain, as its muscles were overstretched in recovering itself, the animal rushed on; but, in that brief momentary pause, Henry Stearns saw that a young girl dressed in spotless white was upon the horse, and as it sprung across the corner of the pit, she turned her face, pale as death, and her eyes filled with terror, toward the southeast, from whence the thunder of many hoofs now proceeded.

Mustang and maid flashed from view in an instant; but Stearns, with eyes fixed and staring, frozen in his tracks and incapable of speech or movement, recognized in the white-robed rider, his daughter Stella!

A hoarse, unearthly, choking whisper broke, in an agonizing manner from his lips, while his eyes stood out in horror and deathly despair.

"Stella! My poor Stella! Oh, my God, hast Thou deserted me? Oh, Lord, protect her! Protect my child from those yelling fiends!"

As this whisper so strangely struggled from his throat, in a choking, gurgling manner, he heard more distinctly the thunder of many scores of hoofs coming up closely on the south side of the pit.

He knew that the Indians were quartering in the race, to cut Stella off from the creek bottom; but, ere his frenzied brain fully and truthfully comprehended the awful danger of his darling, in all its horrid details, another horse approached the pit from the east toward the creek, evidently a laggard in the chase.

Henry Stearns, as we have seen, had stood as if paralyzed, in the face of this new horror; but, as he did so, on came the lone rider, at a thundering gallop, and seemingly directed toward the opening.

Self-preservation is the first law of nature, and Stearns, notwithstanding his strange state of mind and body, crouched back behind his dead horse, and the next instant, a dark mass shot between him and the moonlight, followed by a sickening surge, a cracking of bones, and a terrific screech from the maimed horse, as the animal dashed into the pit, its limbs being broken and forced into the earth, slipping the flesh upward, and blending with the fearful cry of the steed, came a wild guttural yell of horror from human lips!

Stearns saw the wild flowing hair, the bare flesh above the belt, the bow and quiver, and the glittering lance decorated with scalps—then, with an insane shriek, most horrible to hear, he bounded, panther-like, with knife in hand, upon the warrior, who was now struggling to disentangle himself from his mustang.

This hideous savage had been in pursuit of his daughter, his idolized Stella, to kill her, to torture her fair flesh; or worse, to enslave her, to bind her to a hellish servitude, and the very thought of it made the heretofore weak invalid a giant of strength.

He grasped the coarse black hair of the brave, wound his fingers in it, and jerked backward the head, displaying in the moonlight, the painted face and breast; then, up flashed the glittering steel, and down plunged to the hilt in the heaving paint-daubed breast. Out and up, followed by spurt and spray of blood through the silvery light, and then down once more, through flesh and bone, crunching horribly; while, out on the clear air, burst the wild death-yell of the Comanche brave!

But, as he hurled the hideous, bleeding corpse from him, and sprung into the middle of the pit, backward, Henry Stearns was again thrown violently to the earth, pressed to the bottom of the opening, and as he gazed upward, he found his strength all gone, his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth, and his frame quivering with cold chills. What he once apprehended had really come.

That horrible mass of bones, with the skin drawn tightly over them, that wild, tangled, huge shock of wavy midnight hair, those awful fiery eyes—all were over him, and the cold, clammy nose of the bull bison was thrust within an inch of his face!

CHAPTER XI.

TRUE TO HER NAME.

SINGLE EYE jerked Chase into the shade of the timber, pushed him against a tree-trunk, and held him firmly there, although all his powers of strength and agility were brought into use to accomplish it, for the youth struggled desperately, his face contorted with an-

guish that was painful to witness, his glassy eyes fixed upon the fast-flying form of his darling Stella and the horde of red fiends who were galloping with wild yells to intercept her.

It was a thrilling scene to witness, harrowing to any one even were the fair girl unknown to him, but to one who loved her more than all the world, more than himself, it was indeed most agonizing. Charles Chase trembled with passion.

"Hol' on, Charley! Hol' on, I told yer, an' 'low this hyer ole perrarer dog ter 'splain hisself. Ef ther reds gits a peep et us we're goners dead sure an' sartin, and then hit's all up wi' ther leetle gal. What ther dickens air ther row with her, anyway? She's plum gone crazy, or thar's somethin' happened what we-uns don't undercomstand. But jist listen ter me, an' holt yer mule a bit. Ef yer stomped over ther perrarer don't yer see yer'd git scooped in? An' ef yer gut tuck we'd be wuss off than ever. Yer c'u'dn't do any good. Yer'd git sculped an' toasted ter death, an' what good 'ud that do ther leetle gal? She'd be in jist ther same fix, an' we'd lose a fighter. Ef yer'll keep yer brain-box sorter 'frigerated, we'll sarcumvent ther condemned kiotes an' git ther gal outen ther fix she's boun' ter git herself inter. Nobody ever made a good job at crawling in on reds, an' playin' scientific games fer ha'r, when they was badly 'cited. Ef yer'll promise me yer'll naver gate slow, an' pard wi' Single Eye in this hyer game, an' not sling in a keerd 'thout yer sees my peeper shut an' 'pear like a ole knot-hole—ef yer'll take a mild afferdavy ter do as I perposes, an' glide when I glides, why, sooner er later, I sw'ar by Davy Crockett's bleed mershine that Miss Stellar shall be free as a eagle o' ther Rockies. What d'yer say?"

Single Eye rattled this off rapidly, without letting go of Chase, for he saw that his words would be likely to make no impression while the latter could still see the heart-rending pursuit of the young girl by the Comanches.

"Single Eye, loosen your hold, and allow me to look out over the plain," said the youth, in a hoarse voice. "I acknowledge your wisdom in this matter, and will follow your advice. Your experience in this kind of life and your knowledge of Indian character should not be questioned by me. I was wild and unable to control myself. Let me loose now; I promise to follow your instructions to the letter. There is no other way of saving Stella except by strategy, as you have just intimated, for there is a large force of the red dastards."

"Now yer talkin' solid sense, Charley. Take a squar' look et ther bellyuns an' ther leetle gal. She's nigh on ter ther timber o' ther crick, but she'll git tuck in ther bush, er clos't ter bit, on t'other side. Ef she kep' ther plain an' turned north she mought 'a' gi'n ther sculpers the slip, but ther poor child don't know what ter do. Hit's strange thet she's kep' up so long. I thought she'd drap when ther painted kiotes kim yellin' arter her. Hit's a big ole he mystery how she c'u'd be sashayin' roun' this-a-way when ther reds aires thicke June-bugs on a muggy night. Es soon es she strikes ther crick thet nag'll stop an' drink, in spite of all she kin do, fer hit's a hot night, an' ther hoss hes hed a long run."

"She will die with horror and dread," exclaimed Charles, "when those red fiends surround her. It is awful! But they will not kill her—will they, Single Eye?"

The young man looked at the scout in an agony of suspense, awaiting the answer which he feared.

"Nary kill," was the reply. "They'll be purty consider'ble 'fected by sich a purty gal; an' her bein' out 'lone in the night, 'sides not doublin' on her trail an' shootin' back whar she come from which she could 'a' did, an' gut away from 'em—thet'll flustercate 'em, an' make 'em think she's kinder lunny, which'll save her from bein' killed fust off; an' mebbe so when they see thet she's so purty, some big chief'll gi'n a hundred or so horses fer her, which'll gi'n us time ter sarcumvent ther bellyuns. But we-uns must glide in an' tell ther boyees, an' then skute down, an' take a look in et ther Carmanch' lay-out. I reckon we kin find a place whar we kin git a squint et ther camp, an' git thar 'bout ther time ther yelpin' sculpers 'roves with ther leetle gal."

So saying, Single Eye jumped into the timber, followed by Chase, who was grinding his teeth, and quivering from head to foot with frantic rage.

Tongue cannot tell, and pen cannot describe

the feelings of the poor fellow when he recognized Stella Stearns flying over the plain, like a leaf before the gale, toward such deadly danger. Her strange appearance, at such an hour, and in such a place, was most mysterious and unaccountable; and perhaps none but the eyes of love would have identified her under such circumstances. Had not Stella been uppermost in the thoughts of Charles Chase, had he not known that her home was but a few miles away, he would not have known the maiden who galloped thus wildly over the plain, as the girl he had loved from childhood.

He could not understand what it meant. And he was racked with anguish the most intolerable, for he knew that the bloodthirsty savages, whom he and his companions had seen, were encamped up the stream, where she was fast speeding. But when, the next instant, he beheld the horde of war-painted fiends dashing in pursuit of her, the world seemed to be turned into a Hades.

Human heart and brain could not possibly have borne greater misery than was heaped upon him and live; and, had it not been for the prompt and energetic action of the old scout, he would have sped over the plain to meet a horrible death, without having in the least been of benefit to Stella Stearns. Just the opposite indeed, for she would most probably have been forced to witness his dying agonies, in the protracted torture which would certainly have followed his capture; as the Indians were in a perfect frenzy at their great loss in the recent fight, and the escape of the minute-men.

Luckily for Chase, the old scout fully realized his condition of mind, and put his solitary eye on double duty, keeping a close watch of his young protegee, and also darting glances here and there, in order that no lurking red foe should get the "drop" on them.

But we will return to our main trail.

Chase followed Single Eye into the undergrowth in a most desperate state of mind; but prudently and reasonably resolving, now that he had hope of saving Stella through the cunning and sagacity of the old scout, to be guided in all future movements by the latter, and not allowing himself to jeopardize the safety of himself and friends, or the chance of rescuing Stella, by the foolish recklessness he had first shown.

For all this, he would have been a most dangerous man for an Indian to meet; for his strength had now returned to him, and he felt that he could hurl himself into the midst of half a dozen braves, and slash through their vitals, before they could know who or what had assailed them. In fact, his nerves were now steady, his muscles firm, and the situation of affairs doubled his strength as it were; besides he was as quick in his movements, almost, as a flash of light.

Upon covering one-half the distance between the border of the timber and the little open space where the two youths had been left to guard the camp, Single Eye and Chase were brought to a halt by a peculiar squeal from the front.

"Thunderation!" exclaimed the old scout, in amazement. "Thet's ole Skip, an' she's a-chawin' on ther neck o' a red, er I'm ther mistakenest one-eyed monkey on the mem'randum. Come on, Chase! Thar is some of ther pesky red ha'r-slathers crawled in on the boyees. Gi'n 'em cold steel!"

With these words, Single Eye plunged, crashing through the bushes, drawing his bowie as he ran, and Chase, following close after, dashed toward the "open," from which sounded a shout of alarm from Fox and Wolfe, that accelerated their movements, if that were possible.

However, before plunging through the undergrowth that bordered the opening, they came upon the young men, each with a knife in his hand. They were peering through the bushes into the camp, but quickly whirled about in defensive attitudes, as the crashing of bushes sounded in their rear. This changed when they recognized the friends they had so wished for.

Fox threw up one hand, in a gesture of caution, while Chase and the scout came softly along a natural line in the bushes, within which was a belt of soft moonlight. Still nothing was to be seen.

"What ther dickens air up?" whispered Single Eye.

"We don't know what the commotion pro-

ceeds from, but we do know that one Indian at least is in the border of the bushes on the other side of camp. We saw his painted face for an instant only, and then it was quickly withdrawn: immediately after, there was a terrific crashing of bushes, and we dared not make any movement, for fear of betraying our presence to the war-party. In the name of wonder, Single Eye, tell us what those strange noises are? Are there two Indians fighting in those bushes? Surely that cannot be?"

"Whar's Skip?" inquired the old scout. "Didn't I tole yer not ter 'low her ter meander outen camp?"

Fox peeped through the bushes in surprise, saying:

"Well, Single Eye, I can't see your mare, but I'll take my oath Skip-lively was in the camp not ten minutes ago."

The old scout's one eye twinkled with pride and satisfaction; and, with a low chuckle that seemed to the boys out of place and uncalled for, rolled over his lips, made no immediate response. The young men looked at him in surprise, being rather offended at seeing him show an amused expression at such a time.

Had Wolfe and Fox known of the dread position of Stella Stearns, they would have been even more indignant. As for Chase, he was greatly shocked. Was Single Eye going insane? Was everybody about to become crazy? At last the scout turned the youths about, facing the opening.

"Boyees, I hears a crackin' o' brush ag'in. Peep inter camp, an' I reckon yer'll see a sight wo'th seein'. Hit'll be better'n a circus, er I'm a-chawin' bugs fer grub fer ther nex' six moons."

All four now, with knife in hand, stood in a line, darting glances of wonder, not free from apprehension.

As they had held their whispered consultation, the noise had for a short time ceased; but, as the old scout looked within the camp, the whisking of the bushes and the breaking noises were redoubled; and, to the amazement of the young men, which was mingled with horror that, however, changed to intense relief, they saw the missing mare of Single Eye stumble into the moonlight from the underbrush, dragging the crushed and mutilated body of an Indian, whose eyes bulged from the sockets, and tongue protruded.

Shaking the body, as a terrier would shake a captured rat, Skip-lively allowed the corpse to drop from her jaws; then she raised one forefoot, and brought the hoof down spitefully, crushing through the ribs of the Comanche, and causing the blood to fly through the moonlit air in all directions.

But, at the same moment, four warriors, with bows in hand, and arrows between their fingers, dashed through the bushes on the west side of the camp in great haste; but as they saw the horses, and the strange one-eyed steed stamping upon one of their brother braves, they all came to a halt, darting glances around the camp, as if expecting on the instant to receive their death-wound from some unknown and unseen source, and in an unaccountable manner, against which it was useless for them to combat. Here they stood in a camp, in which was no living human being, and before them was a singular beast which, although it bore the shape of a horse, shot at them, from its single optic, furious glances like those of a panther; glances that threatened attack, while beneath its hoofs lay one of their warriors, horrible in death, crushed and mutilated by the weird, horse-like beast that appeared to be the sole defender of the deserted camp.

CHAPTER XII.

BIG MEDICINE.

WHEN Stella Stearns discovered the horde of yelling Indians bounding from the bottom timber of the Clear Fork to intercept her, she was for a time filled with the most horrible dread, which stopped all thought and calculation in regard to escaping from the fate which seemed inevitable; consequently, she did not even attempt to guide her horse in another direction, or to whirl the animal about, and return.

Ahead, beyond the timber of the creek, she felt sure that her father had been either killed or captured, and, at all risks, that was her objective point.

Her agonizing grief and intense concern for her father, in a measure dazed her brain, and

partially drowned her fear of being taken by the savages.

But the immediate and terrible peril that menaced her, soon forced her from this state, and caused her to urge her horse at greater speed; the noble animal, although already pressed beyond its usual runs, plunging again into a desperate gallop, seeming to comprehend that the yelling Indians were to be feared and avoided. Thus on, the poor girl dashed, beyond the direct point to which the red-men had guided their mustangs to cut her off, and for a time she was safe; but the Indians, turning their animals gradually toward the west, lashed the mustangs unmercifully with their quirts, intending, if possible, to cut Stella off from entering the timber of the creek, but the noble black horse astonished them by his speed, and they realized that their only chance of capturing the white squaw, was in the timber, where she would be obliged to dash through the thicket, and ford the stream.

The creek bottom would check the speed of the horse; and a part of the braves urged their mustangs toward the stream, aiming to strike the same below the point where Stella was heading, hoping thus to head the poor girl off, and take her captive.

Her strange manner, white clothing, and remarkable daring had greatly impressed them; and they were at a loss to imagine where she could have come from, why she was dashing thus madly over the plain by night, and what she sought in a region where few whites had ever ventured even in force.

But, strange though it all was, they were resolved to capture her, even though they killed many animals in the mad chase. The horse which she rode had taken their eye as well. Had there been no one upon its back, they would have run their mustangs as long as they could stand, in the endeavor to catch the fleet and beautiful steed. But there was a double incentive, for they would also secure one of the detested whites, who must die at the torture stake, in partial retaliation for their great loss in the recent fight with the terrible Texans.

As Stella gazed backward toward the northeast, when her horse sprung over the "sink-hole," she saw that a portion of the warriors had separated from the others, and had headed directly for the timber, something like a quarter of a mile below the place where she intended to enter the bottom, and toward which her noble horse was now frantically bounding.

"All is for the best" is an adage which we are often called upon to doubt most decidedly; but, in many cases, after time has passed, have been forced to admit that it has proven true. That Stella's passing her father unnoticed was for the best, can be plainly seen; still, it seemed most terrible to him. She, his child, was doomed to a most terrible fate. She could not possibly escape the red fiends. And he, if the Indians did not discover, and butcher him, was doomed to a most horrible fate.

But the Fates had decreed that his daughter should fly past the deep pit in which crouched the one she sought, unconscious of his presence; and she, risking more than life to gain a glimpse of him dead or alive.

Directly behind her, was a single Indian, quartering toward her from the southeast was a score of braves, while as many more warriors were headed directly toward the timber to the south of her something like a quarter of a mile distant. All this Stella saw, as she dashed into the dark shades, the black steed now panting laboriously, and making but slow progress. When at last, the exhausted animal reached the water, it plunged its nose and eyes deep into the same, swallowing the cool liquid with frantic avidity; Stella, all the while, trying to pull up its head, and urge the animal forward.

She had not thought of this. She had not dreamed that the noble beast, that had thus far kept her from the clutches of the red fiends, would spoil all by resisting her feeble efforts to urge it through the stream and on to freedom.

She jerked the bridle-rein with a strength born of intense horror. She cried out to the horse pleadingly, as one would to a human being, but the poor animal heeded her not.

She heard the Indians crashing through the bushes, and while she trembled like a leaf, a happy thought shot through her mind. She tore the breast-pin from the delicate lace at her throat, and plunged the sharp point again and again into the hams of the horse, in frantic haste.

With a series of snorts, the animal splashed through the water, and scrambled up into the bushes on the west side of the stream. Again was the long sharp pin thrust into the flesh of the black steed, and it bounded crashing toward the plain, while the timber resounded with exultant yells, as the red pursuers discovered their intended victim, and knew that the end of the race was now near at hand.

Out from the bottom, upon and over the plain, sprung the black horse, and Stella quickly glanced to the south, as the clear view opened. As she did so, a wild shriek shot from her lips; for, not twenty yards away, two braves were coming, like the wind, toward her.

Stella knew that she was lost. Her time had come; and, as she raised her hands toward heaven, her lips refused to utter a trembling prayer, except in gasping whispers. Almost at the same instant bronze arms were thrown quickly forward, the noble steed was jerked to a halt, and blood-stained savage hands grasped the soft, white arms of Stella Stearns!

Again a piercing cry of horror broke from her lips, and she sunk back, as devoid of sense as a corpse.

And a mercy it was that the poor girl was thus deprived of consciousness, for the night air now rung with hideous cries, as the painted braves rode up in numbers from the bottom, to gaze upon the fair captive.

A strange scene was now presented—a scene brilliantly illuminated by the moon. Some forty feather-bedizened, war equipped Comanches threw themselves from their wild-eyed steeds, and gathered in a hideous circle around the black horse, the white captive, and the two young braves who had been the first to reach the pale-faced squaw.

Stella lay upon the sward, a being of unearthly beauty, but pale as death, and apparently dead; and standing, one on each side of her motionless form, were the two young warriors, with their arms folded over their painted breasts, and their snake-like eyes glowing upon each other with the most deadly hate.

The guttural clamor of the warriors, as they rode up, dismounted, and gathered in a circle, ceased, as all saw the position and aspect of the two braves who had been the successful ones in the race.

Nothing was now heard except the panting of the exhausted animals.

For full two minutes the two Indians gazed into each other's eyes, neither flinching; then one of them spoke in an indignant and insulting tone:

"To-ma-no-a-ku-no's (The Sleek Otter) tongue is forked. The hand of Ki-an-ce-ta (The Weasel), first felt the arm of the white squaw. The black horse is his."

"To-ma-no-a-ku-no's tongue is not forked," replied the other, scornfully. "Lies build their nests in the mouth of Ki-an-ce-ta. The black horse is not his. I have spoken."

The Weasel drew back his head and body, and deliberately spat in the face of The Sleek Otter; the next instant, stooping and tearing a handful of grass from the sod, and casting it over the head of the brave he had so shamefully and publicly insulted.

A loud and guttural murmur arose from the circle of warriors, and four sprung forward—two toward each of the young braves—and grasping their wrists, led them toward their horses, forced them to mount, and secured them with buffalo-skin thongs to their saddles, making sure of them by one of the warriors mounting his own horse, and clutching the jaw-strap of that of his prisoner, to lead him.

Thus bound, with a warrior upon each side to guard them, this small party detached themselves from the main body, riding back toward their encampment; while, out on the night air, the wild, weird death-song sounded its dreary monotone from the two bound braves.

As these six men departed, the attention of the war party was once more directed to the captive; and the two principal warriors, who were acting as chief and sub-chief, since their leaders and most celebrated braves had been killed in the fight with the minute-men, advanced to the side of the still senseless Stella.

Each stalked up on different sides and stood in the same tracks where had stood the two braves who were now chanting their death-songs. They then stooped forward, and each grasped an arm of the beautiful girl—arms

from which the muslin sleeves had been torn from shoulder to wrist.

As they raised her arms upward their eyes filled with amazement, and they darted glances upon the marble face of the senseless maiden.

"Waugh!" burst from the lips of one.

"Waugh!" echoed the other.

"Big Medicine!" broke from the first speaker.

"Big Medicine!" was the echo from the other, as he made a gesture with his hand, glancing at the same time around the circle of braves, who gathered close up to the trio and gazed in wonder and awe upon the white arms, upon the ivory-like surface of which, between the shoulder and elbow, was upon one a life-like and artistic representation of a turtle in red and blue India ink, its claws and head projecting from the shell, and upon the other, in the same colors, and evidently by the same artist, a rattlesnake, coiled as if for deadly spring.

At this moment a deafening peal of thunder, like the near explosion of artillery, rolled athwart the heavens, although but a small cloud was to be seen, and, at the same time, a large black wolf dashed from the timber of the creek, its nose and eyes pointed skyward, and speeding in far-reaching bounds, while piercing and terrible howls burst from its throat. The beast made directly through the crowd of braves, who sprung from its path in superstitious horror, and, bounding over the outstretched form of Stella Stearns, it flew like an arrow shot from a bow over the plain, soon being lost to view.

For an instant the Indians gazed in superstitious awe upon their beautiful captive, then into each other's eyes, and then all fell forward prone upon the prairie, hiding their faces in the grass.

Thus they remained for some minutes, and then the two chiefs sprung erect, giving a howl in concert, while they looked toward the moon.

All the braves arose as the howls burst on the air, and one of the chiefs waved his hand in a gesture for attention. Deathly silence was upon the plain, and over the entire scene, now so impressive, as the chief spoke:

"Kam-se-la-um-ko (The Rolling Thunder) has gone to the great valley beyond the moon, but he has spoken to his braves from the sky. O-so-la (The Big Wolf) went on the long dark trail with Kam-se-la-um-ko, but he has come back to tell the warriors he led to battle that the white squaw is Big Medicine. She came in the night. She flew upon the sky. Our chiefs, whose death-yells sounded when the last sun was shining, who fell before the fast shooting guns of the pale-faces, have sent the white squaw to save their people from the Bad Spirit's breath (sickness), to bring rain when the corn drops before the sun, and to make their arms strong in battle. Her skin is white, for she came from the white clouds of the sky, but it will soon turn red. The white squaw is Big Medicine. It is enough. Nis-ti-una (The Wild Horse) has spoken."

"Sa-was-saw (The Bear) has few words on his tongue," said the other chief. "Kam-se-la-um-ko has spoken from the cloud. O-so-la has looked upon the white squaw, and filled the air with howls. The spirits of our dead chiefs say the white squaw is Big Medicine. It is enough. Sa-was-saw's tongue will be silent when the spirits of our chiefs have spoken."

Nothing could have occurred that was calculated to impress the superstitious Indians more than the startling events just recorded. The same corresponding, or coinciding with the names of their chiefs who had been slain in the fight with Belknap Bill and his boys the previous day.

The discovery of the *totems* on the arms of Stella, her mysterious appearance on the plain in the night time, added to her striking beauty, had aroused their superstitious natures; and the roll and peal of the thunder, together with the strange appearance and actions of the large black wolf, filled the bill to the last line, thus insuring Stella Stearns from all harm, and indeed causing her to be looked upon as a visitor from the other world, and sent by the slain chiefs.

Wonder and reverence filled the minds of the Comanche war-party, as they gazed upon the fair captive.

CHAPTER XIII.

AMONG THE "CITZ."

MARM DEAN gave her tongue full "length of lariat," after she had reached the combination mail, mercantile and medicine establish-

ment of Fort Belknap. The town was generally known as the "fort," by way of abbreviation, and had received its name in the first place from an army officer; but, like many other military stations, there was no indication of a fort anywhere near it.

The day had been so eventful that the worthy landlady, for once at least, had no scarcity of topics to discuss—the discussion was generally all on one side—topics which were quite fresh; and she was not obliged, as was frequently the case with her, to refer to the exciting times of the sweet long ago, when she "was a gal in Ohio, an' c'u'd 'rastle wi' a b'ar es well es any kaliker kivered thet ever tromped this yere yearth; an' c'u'd snuff a candle et two hundred yards, 'thout twistin' up her back ha'r, ter draw ther skin tight, fer ter keep from winkin' when she pulled trigger."

As the presence in the house, of the wounded men, drew many of the denizens of the burg to the combination store, Marm Dean had a large audience, and held the floor; notwithstanding that she had a most desperate and provoking "tussle" to keep her corn-cob pipe alight, forgetting, each time she removed the stem from between her teeth to give her tongue more "free range," that she was smoking. This necessitated a frequent and spiteful slide off a molasses barrel to a candle on the counter, for the purpose of igniting the obstinate tobacco.

Time flew fast and unnoticed with Marm Dean when she had an opportunity of giving her peculiar English an airing, and it was midnight before the anxious friends of the wounded men departed, feeling sure, from the verbal bulletins, that they would never see Tom Gaines and Jim Johnson alive, as, notwithstanding the opiates that had been administered, they had not been thrown into a sleep, and relapsed from spasm to spasm, their wounded limbs still continuing to swell, and turning to a greenish black color.

The doctor assured those who had waited, in hopes of a change, that the poor fellows must die—that nothing on earth could save them, as too much time had passed after the arrows pierced them before remedies had been applied, and this had allowed the poison to permeate their blood and entire systems.

Grief-stricken, their friends all withdrew, and Marm Dean, with a grunt of surprise, when she overheard one of the neighbors say it was midnight, slid off the barrel for the thirtieth and last time, and waddled through the hotel, or, as she termed it, "ther ho-t'l." By this time she was quite sleepy—she always was inclined that way when she had no one to talk to—and she made halt at the foot of the stairs, muttering in soliloquy, in a hoarse half-whisper, after she had called out "Stellar" a number of times, without obtaining an answer.

"Thet med'sun hes made her glide inter a heffy sleep, an' hit's a pity ter wake her up. I declar' I won't nother; fer, fust off, hit's a big job ter climb them sta'rs, an' ef I gits up ther', an' gits ter gabbin' ag'in, thar ain't no tellin' whether I won't sot ontill mornin' 'thout knowin' hit, an' mebbe so run her e'ena most crazy. She's gut enough now onter her mind ter spile ther reg'lar biz o' her brain-box, es Bill says; so I'll jist kinder tumble inter bed, er I won't be wo'th shucks ter-morrer."

Marm Dean "tumbled," but we opine that the word must have been credited by her with a different meaning from that given in dictionaries; for, if she had literally tumbled into bed, it would have of necessity to have been constructed with at least six-by-eight oak timber, and two-by-four slats of the same, or there must have been an extensive breakage, and a corresponding crash, as the three hundred pounds avoirdupois "tumbled."

We are forced to the conclusion that Marm Dean crawled into bed quietly, gently and cautiously feeling her way as she did so, an elephantine instinct telling her that all before her was safe, and would sustain her weary, weighty form.

We have never traveled with the "Fat Woman," nor in fact with any other woman—as perhaps the reader may think, from our lingering for a minute or so with Marm Dean, when other and more important characters—in point of interest—have enlisted so strongly our sympathies, but it was necessary for us to explain why the flight of Stella Stearns was not discovered, and why the gallant minute-men of Young county did not gallop at once to her rescue.

The reader now knows that had Marm Dean been less fond of hearing the dulcet sound of her own voice, she would have been at the bedside of the poor girl half an hour after she had first left her, and thus discovered her absence.

Then again, giving that good lady full license on the "talk," had she been less corpulent, she would have mounted the stairs when she did, at long last, reach her home, and would then have discovered that her patient was gone.

Still once more, Marm Dean had been up so late the previous night, to an unusually late hour even for her, she overslept herself, and to her great surprise found that the sun was shining into her chamber window when she opened her eyes.

With a "Bless my soul" of consternation and self-condemnation, she rolled out of bed, and hastily attiring herself, began puffing like a porpoise, with excitement and dread, to think that she might possibly find Stella dead, and waddled, as fast as she could accomplish it, up the stairs.

As she gained the bed-chamber of her much loved guest, her fat face was a study for a comic artist.

She saw that the bed was empty, the covering being carelessly thrown over the foot-board.

Stella was gone! That was evident. But when did the poor child go, and where?

Marm Dean peeped into the next room, and under the beds in both, being forced to sink upon her knees and drop forward upon her hands, to get a view beneath the same; and it was a very difficult matter for her to regain her perpendicular afterward, which caused her to be quite red in the face, her fright and astonishment at the absence of Stella assisting to brighten the color.

"Stellar's gut up 'arly an' skuted out roun' ther fort ter see ef her dad's be'n heerd from."

Thus reasoned Marm Dean, as she hastened, as fast as was possible with her, to descend the stairs, and rush out into the street.

The first person she met was Belknap Bill, and before she could speak, he inquired quickly and anxiously:

"Marm Dean, how's Miss Stella? Did she sleep good?"

Had a bombshell exploded at her feet, hurled her through the air, and left her unhurt, sitting outside the ridge boards of the deserted barracks, the landlady would not have been more dumfounded.

She felt sure that Bill must have been anxiously walking the street since daylight, and waiting to hear of the poor girl's condition. She could almost swear to this, knowing Bill as she knew him, and knowing of his great admiration for the grief-stricken girl. And if Belknap Bill had not seen Stella, where was she? She could not be in the town, if Bill had not met her; for Bill was everywhere. Marm Dean gasped for breath. Then, in a voice of anguish, she cried out:

"Bill, Stellar's gone! She ain't in her room. She ain't in ther ho-t'l. Lord a-massy me! What c'u'd 'a' become o' her, Bill! Ther poor gal hes dusted, skuted, sloped, levanted, glided up ther river arter her dad! Thet's hit, sure es shootin', an' I shill go plum crazy, I'm dead sure on hit!"

There was a heavy weight of sincere anguish and poignant grief expressed in every word; and the tears rolled copiously down her fat cheeks, as she shrieked out her apprehensions.

Belknap Bill's eyes glittered in a cold, steely stare, as he looked into those of Marm Dean. His face turned as pale as death, his teeth closed tightly together, and the nails of the fingers of his clinched hands almost pierced the rough thick skin of his lariat-hardened hands. For a moment he stood thus; then he spoke, in a husky, rattling half-whisper:

"What air yer givin' me, Marm Dean? Yer don't mean fer ter go fer ter say thet our Stella hes gone 'way from ther burg?"

"I sw'ar, Bill, she's gone! Skute quick, an' see ef thar's any saddle nags a missin', fer God's sake, Bill. I declar' I shill die, fer I never cared a 'coon-skin fer anybody, since my ole man gut a lance through his hull bested bizness parts an' we hed ter plant him, till Stellar 'roved."

"Ef ther red hellyuns scoops her in, an' scarifies her ontill she wilts like a faded flower, I jist be dog-goned ef I doesn't go on ther war-path myself, an' take ter ther sculpin' biz!"

Belknap Bill did not wait to hear Marm

Dean's words, however, for he darted toward the old log-house which he used as a stable.

One glance inside, and all was explained. Ther black horse was gone, and Bill knew as well in his mind that Stella Stearns had ridden away on the back of his steed, as though he had assisted her to the saddle.

But when had she gone? It must have been in the night. Certainly not within the last three hours, for he had been for that length of time pacing impatiently up and down the street, awaiting to ascertain the poor child's condition.

Where had she gone? No need to ask; for Bill knew in his own mind that she had gone up the Brazos, up Clear Fork, in search of her father. And not only this; he knew that, as he bounded from the stable, on his return to the street, he knew that at that very moment, she was in the Apache camp—a captive! Perhaps condemned to the terrible torture, or even to a fate that was infinitely worse; for, even had she followed the timber, every bend in the stream which the black steed would have taken would have led her into the jaws of despair, degradation, and death, in two hours' time, or less.

He rushed like a madman through the streets, yelling for his men. He dashed into the post-office, grasped the alarm horn from its customary peg, and blew a series of blasts, such as had never before been heard in the town; and, in response, rushing from all quarters, came the hardy border-born minute-men, followed by their intensely anxious wives and children, and when they heard the loudly called words from Belknap Bill, "Stella's gone, boyes! Ther Angel o' ther Fort hes skuted up ther drink arter her dad! She's tuck afore this by ther r'arin' 'roarin' reds!" then tears from the eyes of anguished women flowed freely, and children huddled about their mothers, and cried aloud with grief and terror. Strong men, too, instinctively gripped the butts of their revolvers, and set their teeth in desperate madness, mingled with torturing concern.

And, as if their cup of bitterness were not yet full, the doctor, at this moment, ran wildly out from his dwelling, shouting in the most frantic manner:

"Run, boys! Run, I say! Scatter and scour the town, for Tom and Jim have broken loose and fled!"

So it was. The two poor wounded men, now perfectly insane from the torture produced by the poison from the arrows of the Comanches, which had spread through blood and nerve, had been fastened, securely as it was thought, to their beds, and their wives, and children, and friends generally, who had been by their bedsides the greater portion of the night, were, by fatigue and the prostrating influence of grief and anxiety, added to the mental torture they had themselves experienced from witnessing the most terrible contortions and convulsions of the poor sufferers, at length forced to return to their humble homes, and retire to rest. In consequence of this, the victims of poison had been left alone, the doctor giving each one of them a dose of morphine, and then retiring. They had, however, been but very little affected by the drug, except in so far that it had rendered them more crazed than ever; and, by a strength that was born of the most excruciating agony and insanity, they burst their bonds, and then crawled out from the window of the room in which they had been placed, which was upon the ground floor.

When the startling announcement, which had been made by Belknap Bill, of the flight, and most probable capture of Stella Stearns by the Comanches, fell upon the ears of the assembled crowd, they were all plunged, as has been shown, into almost hopeless grief; and now, they were filled with additional horror, by the startling words of the doctor, in regard to the poor men, Gaines and Johnson.

But he had barely revealed the dread fact, when the shouts of a young lad upon the high bank above the spring, drew the attention of the entire assemblage; and the whole population ran down the road in the direction of the spring, all arriving nearly at the same moment, and just in time to witness a most heart-rending sight.

Afar below them, but plainly visible to all, on the bank of the Brazos, were the two wounded men, with terribly swollen bodies, alternately crawling, and staggering to their feet, then running for a few paces, or rolling for a minute or two in convulsions; their only

aim, their only sane thought seeming to be water. This they soon saw, at a little distance below them, and then they staggered to their feet, with the most fearful cries—shrieks which pierced the very souls of those who were within hearing. Then they plunged downward to death—to relief from their awful agony, to freedom from a torture which was beyond all human endurance.

Those who stood and looked upon the sad sight were unable to do more than pity them, to look a pity that could be of no avail. And yet, they stood and gazed, in agony and horror.

But there was another sufferer to be thought of. It required no very great stretch of the imagination to fancy the torture-wrung cries of another, of one young, and beautiful, and good, borne upon the morning breeze from up the Brazos—cries for help from one whom they all dearly loved. For all felt in their inmost souls, that Stella Stearns must be, ere this, in the power of those who knew no such word as pity.

CHAPTER XIV.

AMONG THE COMANCHES.

DURING the brief time that the four Indians stood, filled with wonder, not free from dread at the sight of the infuriated one-eyed horse, that, with blood-dripping jaws, stood over their maimed and dead comrade, its eye blazing with the mad frenzy of a panther at bay, the brain of the old scout was not idle.

He was filled with pride at the exploit of his mare, for he had related to the boys like instances of her singular hatred of an Indian and peculiar mode and success in "takin' in outen ther wet" such characters when they came in her way. One instance in particular, when Skip-lively had saved his life by grasping the neck of an Indian between his teeth and actually shaking the life out of him, at a time when the latter was astride of the scout, and about to plunge a knife into his breast.

However, as we have said, Single Eye's mind was not idle. He took in the situation. He knew that, the moment the Comanches had recovered from their surprise, they would, without doubt, shoot the mare. That must never be.

The probability of it filled his mind with anxious concern, and he at once resolved on a dash, a hand-to-hand conflict, trusting cold steel for victory.

By panther-like bounds, each singling out his brave, the old scout had no fear of defeat, for there would be neither time nor space to draw bows, and the Indians would not have their knives in hand, consequently every advantage would be his.

He was now positive that a body of whites had been engaged in conflict with the war-party. From his knowledge of Indian customs, he knew, by the howls over the dead that a large number of Comanches had been slain.

This proved to him that there had been an engagement, but whether between the war-party and the whites, or some other reds, he could not decide. For aught he knew, the Comanches had come in contact with an Apache war-party; but, since these spies had been thrown out in the direction of Fort Belknap, he felt almost positive that the fight had occurred between the whites from the town and this returning war-party.

Not only this, but the number of spies sent out from the camp together, proved to the old scout that the Indians had suspicions that the Texans still lurked in the timber.

Single Eye, however, knew that this was not the case, but he realized that this suspicion of the Indians was of great benefit to himself and the boys; for when the bodies of the slain were discovered, the Comanches would think that their spies had been killed by the minute-men who had returned to the fort, and this would prevent a careful search, and the discovery that but four whites were in the timber of the Clear Fork.

These thoughts flashed into his mind in a moment, and the next he touched each of the young men, and by a pantomime, in which his knife played a prominent part, he made known to them his projects and wishes.

Filled with intense hatred toward the Indians since they had witnessed the dastardly torture of the soldier, the boys were eager for the attack. Chase had an insane longing to dash upon the spies, of which Wolfe and Fox were ignorant, as there had been no time to communicate to them the news of Stella's capture.

The meaning of the old scout was at once understood by the youths, and instantly carried out.

Without a sound escaping their lips, the four desperate whites bounded as one man from the thicket, and sprung directly upon the doubly dumfounded Indians, who half raised their bows, but no more; they were instantly clutched by the hair, and the terrible knives were plunged into their breasts before they could drop their useless bows and arrows, and grasp their long scalping-knives.

"Stop ther cusses' yelp-holes!" cried out Single Eye, as the Indian he had stabbed to the heart sunk upon his knees. The old scout clapped his hand, as he said this, over the Comanche's mouth, and once more drove his knife to the hilt in the breast of his red victim. Chase, with equal success, stabbed the brave he had attacked again and again through the vitals, and preventing the dying yell as directed.

Fox and Wolfe, however, were not so successful. Their knives did not reach a vital part, and both rolled over and over with their foes in desperate fight. But Skip-lively now took a hand, and relieved Fox, by viciously clutching the savage by the neck and shaking the life out of him, while Single Eye finished the red with whom Wolfe was engaged.

Panting with exertion, the four men now stood erect and gazed in satisfaction upon the bleeding forms, thankful at having been so successful in their attempt to open their way to the Comanche camp.

"Skip, ye're a nice, slam-up ole woman, solid clean through, an' worth yer weight in yaller doubloons on ther trail." So said the old scout, patting the neck of his mare as he did so. He then turned to the boys, and said, in a hasty, nervous manner:

"Come, pards; we-uns must move our nags en' tricks t'other side the crick 'fore we skoots up ter 'vestergate things. Move lively! Clean up everything on ther jump, fer we 'uns wants ter make ther reds suppose that ther boyees from Belknap hev tuck these sneakin' spies in outen ther wet. Hit's a p'ison good thing that ther Young county fellars war hyer-a-ways, fer hit leaves all open fer we-uns ter hang 'round 'em an' jark ther leetle gal outen thar cussed clutches."

In a little time nothing remained in the opening except the corpses of the slain Indians, and these were soon hurled into the river by Single Eye, this idea happening to occur to him just previous to his departure.

"Now, Fox an' Wolfe, yer'll be 'bleeged ter take a sot-down wi' Skip an' guard our tricks, fer I can't do nothin' with so many on yer on sich a trail. Ef we-uns is wiped out, skute fer civerlize, an' forgit yer war ever on the Clear Fork, er see'd ole Single Eye!"

"Chase an' this hyer ole perrarer-dog, jist awhile ago, see'd ther condemned red torturers on a wild stompede arter Miss Stella, an' she's tuck afore now, though she had a slam-up critter under her. What bringed her out on ther plain we doesn't know. Hit's a myst'ry, though, thet we calc'lates ter fine out afore many suns. We-uns hes tuck a solid afferdavy thet ther gal hes gut ter come outen ther Curmanch' camp 'thout losin' a ha'r offen her head, though, from what I see'd, she could spar' a leetle 'thout hits bein' pertic'lar noticed."

Fox and Wolfe listened to the disclosure of Single Eye with the utmost surprise, hardly crediting his words. They had known both Stella and her father, in Boston, and they were now much affected by the news which they heard. They had been anticipating a glorious time at Fort Belknap, on their arrival, having filled out their programme of various hunts and fishing tours, not having believed one half in regard to Indian depredations, and secretly wishing that they might see a few hostiles. They now found, to their horror, that they had plunged into a sea of terrors, which seemed to grow deeper at every step of their progress.

Stopping to guard the camp was something they did not care to do; notwithstanding an advance up-stream promised to be a most dangerous undertaking.

"Cannot we go with you, Single Eye?" asked Fox. "I don't like the idea of remaining here inactive when work is to be done. How is it with you, Wolfe?"

"I'm on the war-path," was the reply. "I've just launched out into the butcher business, and I want to keep my hand in. I say, let the horses take care of themselves. Skip-lively is equal to it, I am very sure."

"May we go with you?" inquired Fox, ea-

gerly. "If our horses are discovered and stolen, we can play the same game with the mustangs of the Comanches; or, if this is impossible, we can walk to Fort Belknap."

"I wouldn't lose Skip fer ther bull world. I'd 'bout es soon lose my sculp!" exclaimed the old scout.

"Lariat her in some dark thicket by herself," suggested Wolfe. "I'll bet heavy that she'll cure all the Indians of horse-stealing that may come in her vicinity."

"Wa-al, boyees, hit's a whack. Es ye're so dang'd eager ter git yer heads skinned, I won't block yer trail. Skip, come on; an' ef yer ain't byer when I 'roves back, I'll hev a double an' twisted conniption fit."

So saying, Single Eye led his mare away from the other animals, and secured her in a thicket.

"Boyees," he then said, "foller cluss arter me. Step light. Nary word outen yer beef-traps, no matter what sort ev a circus yer gits a squint et. Come on!"

Soon the small and daring little band reached the vicinity of the Indian encampment, and by stealthy and judicious movements, gained a lookout in a tree, similar to the one from which they had viewed the torture scene, at the camp on the Pecan Bayou.

Below, in an opening, three sides of which were surrounded by towering timber, beneath which was a growth of dense underbrush and luxuriant vines that twined and twisted snake-like amid the branches of the trees, were a dozen smoldering fires; and, scattered about in groups, conversing in low guttural tones, with many gestures, or lying smoking here and there upon the sward, were more than a hundred war-painted braves; while around the camp, next to the timber, was twice that number of mustangs and Indian ponies. The camp was clear around the fires, the horse-gear being thrown in a circle outside, between them and the animals.

The warriors all cast glances toward the entrance of the camp from the northern plain, and soon our friends were astonished at the arrival of six mounted braves, two of them being secured to their saddles.

A hum of surprise also arose from the assembled Indians, who gazed at the two prisoners until those in charge reached the center of the circle of fires they; then halted, and cut the bonds of the two braves, assisting them to the earth, when they stood them back to back, and bound them together.

This done, the horses were lariatied cut to grass, and shortly after, the two acting chiefs came into view, and riding between them upon the coal-black horse, was Stella Stearns, her beautiful face pale as that of a corpse, and her dress soiled, and hanging in rags.

Chase ground his teeth, uttering a low groan, clutching madly at his weapon, his strong frame trembling and swaying; and Single Eye was forced to grasp his arm to sustain him on the limb, or he would doubtless have fallen to the earth.

"Dog-gone hit, pard!" whispered the old scout, in a hoarse voice; "keep yer grip, er we're goners. Things 'pear ter be pannin' out kinder strange. Somethin's up what we-uns can't undercomstan'. Ther boss chief o' ther outfit air 'scortin' Stella, an' two reds is brunged in tied fast. Dang'd ef thar hain't somethin' turned up in favor of yer leetle gal, er I hopes never ter freeze my peeper on keep ag'in. Jest hold steady a bit, while I studies on this hyer bizness."

The warriors who had remained within the camp all now collected on the south side of the circle, evidently puzzled by the novel proceedings. The arrival of the two prisoners, braves of the party who had gone in pursuit of the white squaw, returning bound to the camp, was an enigma to all, for the guard had not spoken a word in explanation, and the entrance of the fair captive, as free from bonds as when she was speeding over the plain, was another profound puzzle.

About two-score of braves rode in the rear, and upon reaching the camp rode here and there to secure good grazing spots for their animals, while the others collected on the north side of the fires.

The two chiefs dismounted on the west side of the camp, beckoned to one of the guard and gave him some directions. To these he responded by procuring a richly-ornamented buffalo-robe, spread it upon the sward, and the chiefs then assisted Stella to alight, their manner showing the greatest respect.

"Dang my heart, liver, an' bull biz'ness!" said Single Eye, in a whisper, with evident relief and pleasure; "Chase, gi'n us yer paw fer a he ole shake. Yer leetle gal air O. K. She's made a impress' somehow on ther superstitious side o' ther condemned kiotes' natur', an' I'm bettin' my eye thet ther ain't one o' ther red scarifiers 'ud dar' ter touch her. How ther thing war bring'd roun' I doesn't pertend ter say, but hit'll soon show, I reckon."

Chase did not seem to be much relieved at the words and explanations of Single Eye. Stella was a captive among a horde of dastardly savages. That was as bad a position as he could conceive of, and he saw no opening for rejoicing, nor could he see any possible way to rescue her from such a large war party.

The chiefs with their knives severed the torn sleeves of the young girl's dress at the shoulders, leaving the arms of Stella entirely bare. They then made commanding gestures to the warriors on the south side of the camp, who had remained there during the race after the young maiden whose beauty now so greatly impressed them all.

The warriors thus summoned now formed in single file and strode toward and past the captive maid, the chiefs pointing and directing the attention of each brave as he passed Stella to the arms of the latter, while they repeated, in a monotonous tone, "Big Medicine," these words being taken up and chanted, as each warrior perceived the singular emblems which they believed to have been placed upon Stella's arms by the Great Spirit, and that consequently any harm done to her would bring sickness, starvation and death upon their people.

"What in thunderation hes she gut on her arms?" asked the old scout, in his amazement, not unmingled with joy.

"She had a turtle and a snake pricked on her arms when much younger—in fact, when she was but ten years old. It was done in a girlish frolic, on the Common in Boston, by an old sailor, who made his living in that way. However, she always regretted very much her foolishness in having it done."

"Hit war the bestest thing she ever hed done, or I'm a liar! Hit'll save her life. A rattler allers comes in es a principal performer in ther 'ligious doin's o' ther 'Paches an' ther neighborin' tribes. An' thar's some on 'em thet 'siders a turtle as a sacred totem. Injuns is es full o' superstition as a alligator gar air o' fust class 'lectric skute biz'ness; an' what one tribe works inter thar 'ligious circusses ther t'other air 'fraid ter meddle with. Ef I ain't muchly mislooken, we're a-goin' ter hev a boss circus right afore us, an' we-uns hes gut front an' elervated persishes. We kin take in ther hull programme, but hit won't do fer us ter clap han's or yelp when we sees a extry hit air made, or they'll run thar show through the hull night an' work we-uns in fer extry performers, gittin' a hefty 'mount o' 'musement outen us. 'Sides, hit air likely ter be ther last audience we'll ever come afore."

"What are those two Indians tied up for?" asked Fox, much impressed, and filled with dread and apprehension at the terribly imposing scene.

"Thar's whar yer gut me whar my ha'r air short; but I reckons on bein' able ter study ther persish o' things out purty soon. They air young braves, an' they hev disobeyed orders, er somethin' o' thet sort. They hain't be'n cowardly, an' cut an' levanted when they war wanted; fer thar hain't be'n no fight while they war skoopin' Stella in. Hole on! I see through ther hull biz. Yer hes gut a chance ter see one o' ther wustest sights yer ever did, er ever will see. Thar a'r a-goin' ter be a Curmanch' duel!"

CHAPTER XV.

DIGGING FOR LIFE.

HENRY STEARNS, when he had sprung upon the Indian brave, and struck his bowie through the heart of the Comanche, as the latter upon his mustang struck the bottom of the sink-hole, was nerved to desperation by the knowledge that certain death awaited him did he not make some attempt to escape from the horrible pit, in which fresh dangers seemed constantly to accumulate. But he had again become weak as a child, and when the hideous bison, in the last stage of starvation, had hurled him to the ground, and stood over him reeling and quivering, hardly able to keep from falling, its huge hairy head shaking as if with palsy, then Stearns gave himself up for lost.

The terrible eyes of the brute glared into his steadily, and the unfortunate man felt that,

were there strength to sustain it and give it vent, the bison would crush and trample him into a shapeless mass in a moment's time.

As it was, he felt that it would be a relief to die; but he did not wish to be slain by an Indian, or to be crushed out of life, and beyond the semblance of humanity, by the hideous beast.

He wished most earnestly, he prayed most sincerely, that he might be permitted to see his precious child once more ere he died, and that he might be buried within the confines of civilization; but he felt that this was not to be—that he was doomed to die in that terrible pit, and in some terrible manner. He had miraculously escaped death, when his horse plunged in with him, and that plunge had saved him from a horrible death at the hands of the Indians. He had been providentially nerved with an unnatural strength, when the warrior upon his steed was hurled into the sink-hole, and now a most awful and loathsome death threatened him. Should he escape this also?

His dread experiences in the pit of horrors had so filled his mind with plans and actions for self-preservation, that he had little time to ponder in regard to the effect of his sudden disappearance upon the people of Fort Belknap, and in particular his darling Stella; and there seemed no prospect of his having time to breathe freely, to regain his composure, and to allow his nervous excitement to subside. For two minutes at the least the bison stood striving with all its strength to overcome its weakness, still gazing down upon its intended victim. It then strove to turn its huge head to one side, in order to bring one of its sharp black horns to bear upon him; but the head was so heavy, its muscles so lax, that the animal came near losing its balance in the attempt.

The hair of Stearns seemed to crawl and twist with the horror he felt, his blood began to chill, and the little strength he had possessed to leave him; for he realized that the bull might fall upon and crush him at any moment. He had felt sure that it could not use its horns, or spring upward and down upon him with its hoofs; but, until this moment, when it came near losing its balance in an attempt to gore him, he had not thought of this dread possibility. Now, however, it seemed to him that his doom was sealed; that it was only a question of time, and a very short time at that, when he would be crushed beneath that horrible frame-work of bones!

The bison had wasted its strength in the attempt to turn its huge head sideways, and as it now recovered its former position, reeling from side to side, it was forced to rest its cold, damp nose upon the face of Stearns, the arms of whom lay limp and nerveless by his side.

The mouth of the brute was now open, and its breath came in heavy, rasping gasps, from its parched throat, causing it to be much more loathsome and revoltingly hideous than before.

Stearns prayed most earnestly for a return of the strength that had nerved him in his struggle with the Indian, and now, with the quickness of thought, he thrust his hands upward upon the huge mop that covered the forward part of the beast's skull, pressing against it, while at the same time he drew up his legs, placing his feet quickly against the breast of the animal, and thus braced, gave a violent push with both hands and feet.

This was more than the starved brute could stand, especially when it had no warning. It sunk backward upon its hams, and, springing to his feet, with bowie in hand, Stearns drove the blade to the hilt in the animal's side, just clearing the shoulder blade. Not a drop of blood flowed from the wound, but a little spray of the sanguine fluid flew from mouth and nostrils; then the eyes of fire slowly grew dim, and with a hoarse, rattling moan, the huge head fell with a heavy thud upon the floor of the pit, the bony frame rolled over, and without a struggle, the bison breathed out its last gasp, and was free forever from the horrible agony that had slowly shrunk its skin over the meatless bones, it having fed so long only upon its own vitals.

With a long drawn sigh of relief and thankfulness, Stearns now rushed to the side of his dead horse, and grasping his canteen drank a deep draught, before he thought of the value of the precious liquid, and the dread torture, to which his past experiences would be as nothing, which he would be forced to suffer when the vessel was empty, should he not be

rescued from the pit before another day had passed. Even now he had a foretaste of what it might be, for he was nearly insane from want of food; but he knew that hunger was a great deal more easily borne than torturing thirst, and did he have a supply of water, he could preserve life for some considerable time.

However, there was meat in plenty, which for a day, or perhaps two days, might be kept in an eatable condition from its being in the pit, where the sun would not greatly affect it; but, after that—?

Great God! the future was pregnant with the dread possibility of what might be, when the pit would swarm with loathsome buzzards, and hundreds of wolves would gaze downward from the plain, their fiery eyes burning into his soul, their howls piercing and racking his brain! He strove to banish the terrible thoughts, but they would spring into his mind at times, and fill him with hopeless despair.

He seated himself upon the saddle, which still remained upon the dead horse, and then, for the first time, he perceived that the mustang of the Indian was still alive. Would the poor suffering beast live, and furnish him with food after the flesh of his own horse had become unfit to eat? Should he wait a day or two before killing the mustang?

He had almost decided to allow the poor animal to live, and thus perhaps be the means of saving his own life, when the tortured brute turned its head, fixed its eyes, human-like with an expression of agony, full upon his own, in a manner that seemed to plead with him for death.

Stearns could not bear that look, and he strode forward, and drove his bowie into the poor animal's heart.

He fancied that the eyes of the mustang were expressing thanks for the merciful deed, and as he stood watching the dying throes of the mustang, and the stream of dark blood that flowed from its side, and upon which the moon shone, giving it a horrible appearance, the thought suddenly came into his mind that perhaps the Indian had something that was eatable attached to his saddle.

At once his eyes darted a look full of ravenous hunger, brought to the front by the thought, and the most eager anticipation, and he gave a cry of extreme joy and relief as he discovered a pair of buckskin malettos, or saddle-bags, attached in their proper position at the cantle, although he knew nothing of the contents of the same. Stearns darted forward, clutched the malettos, slashing the strings that secured them to the saddle, and he then saw that something of some bulk was inside.

Quickly he seated himself and opened the bags, first one side and then the other, and his gratitude knew no bounds when he saw a considerable quantity of dried buffalo-meat, and cakes made from the beans of the mesquite tree, with a small bag of parched corn.

He had, a moment before, decided to cut a steak from the ham of his horse, and devour it raw; he now tore the strips of dried meat like a hungry wolf, not realizing that it was rubbed with *Chile Colorado*, or red pepper, to keep insects from destroying it during the process of drying in the sun, and that this would cause him to have an unusual craving for the water that was now so precious.

Stearns then ate several of the cakes, and when satisfied drank a couple of swallows from his canteen.

He now felt greatly refreshed and strengthened, and his brain was more clear and active.

The thoughts in regard to the decay of the animals again returned to him, and he studied deeply to think of a plan that would relieve him from breathing the poisoned air of the pit after the carcasses should become putrid; if he should not be so fortunate as to be discovered by his friends, or to escape by some means which he had not yet thought of.

Could he dig holes with his knife and bury them? This seemed a herculean undertaking, and one that was not to be seriously considered; but from this thought was born another, and he sprung to his feet, his face beaming with hope, and filled with surprise at his stupidity in not having thought of it before. He felt now that the plan was feasible.

He could dig a slanting road up to the plain, beginning at the hight of his head, and allowing the loose earth to fall at his feet, thus filling in and forming a pathway upward. The lance of the Indian would serve him well in the work, and the knife, with his own, he would

hold in reserve, lest he might break the lance-point; or he could work with them after he had made some progress upward, where the lance could not be used to so good advantage. No sooner had the practicability of the plan become impressed upon his mind, than Stearns procured the lance, and, filled with buoyant hope, proceeded at once to work with a will and a dexterity that promised success, provided only that his strength held out. There was new life in the thought.

He had, during the instant that the black horse sprung across the corner of the "sink-hole," with Stella mounted upon his back, seen that the animal was far superior to the half-breeds and mustangs the Indians who were in chase could possibly have in their possession, and he had hoped that his daughter had escaped the Comanches.

Not only this, but he did not once dream that Stella would search for him by herself, especially in the night; and he supposed that the minute-men had returned with her in the hunt after him, and that she had only become separated from them for a few minutes, when the Indians had discovered and attempted to capture her. He felt certain that she could easily avoid capture on the horse that she rode, and that she would rejoin the men under Belnap Bill, or else, by a roundabout way, return to the fort. A moment's reflection now and then had, happily for him, caused him to come to these conclusions; and he was now positive that Stella was safe, or he would not have worked upon the bank of earth that shut him in securely beneath the surface of the plain. Truly, it would be but labor and sorrow were it not well with his child.

Had he known that, at that moment, Stella lay, pale as death, upon a buffalo-robe in the midst of a camp of a war-party of Comanches, more than three hundred strong, within five miles of him, he would have cast the lance to the earth, and in hopeless despair perhaps taken his own life. But being ignorant of this, as has been mentioned, he worked like a hero, and made the dirt to fly about and around him, while red-jowled buzzards in numbers, already becoming, by a strange and unaccountable instinct, aware of the location of future food, soared with rigid wings afar up in the moonlit sky, mere specks in the star-studded heavens.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHILD OF THE MOON.

WHY a Comanche duel should be such a fearful thing the boys from Boston could not understand.

They reasoned in their minds that there was a chance for at least one of the young braves to be killed, and the other, perhaps, badly wounded. That would make two enemies the less, which would be a cause for rejoicing.

When all the braves who had remained in camp had filed past Stella, and gazed at the singular *totems* which the chief explained to them were formed in the flesh, and could not be washed or rubbed off like paint; when the last warrior in the line had passed the newly-found "Big Medicine," then the chant ceased—the braves who had taken part in the chase falling also into a long line and joining their fellows—all striding closely along the ring of arms, forming a vast circle of hideous savages. But a few of the principal warriors remained near the two chiefs, whose rank had been gained by the death of the older ones in the fight of the day previous. But they had yet to be confirmed as to the rank they should hold by the civil chief, on their return to their village. They now conferred with the most noted warriors. Then Nis-ti-u-na addressed the war-party:

"Braves of the Llanos: Kam-se-la-um-ko and O-so-la have sent the white squaw from the sky in the night. She is the Child-of-the-Moon. That is her name, for the moon has been her home. The spirits of our dead chiefs were angry when Comanche hands pulled Child-of-the-Moon from her mustang. A lie rests on the tongue of one. The bad spirit has been sent into their heads, for they pulled Child-of-the-Moon from her mustang. Our medicine-man is not here, and the bad spirit cannot be driven out. We cannot ask Child-of-the-Moon to drive out the bad spirits that our dead chiefs sent to punish the young braves. Let them drive the bad spirits out of each other. Let them die with knives in their hands. Let them throw themselves to the ground before Child-of-the-Moon, that their spirits may not wander in the dark lands where

the rivers are dry, where there is no game, no grass, no trees, no mustangs. Where their tongues will be parched, and they can find no water. Where they will be hungry, and can find no meat. It is enough. Nis-ti-u-na has spoken."

"The words of Nis-ti-u-na are good to the ears of Sa-was-saw," said the other chief. "It is enough. Cut the young braves loose. Have the young braves brothers on the war-path?"

Two braves, in response to this question of the chief, stepped forward, one from each side of the circle, toward the center of the camp, and the guard passed to each a buckhorn-handled knife, the blade some nine inches in length, and sharpened to a keen edge on both sides of the same.

No sooner were the young braves cut free from their bonds than, agreeably to the advice given by the chief, both threw themselves prostrate, one on each side of Stella Stearns, who had fallen back upon the robe, and sunk into a comatose state from deprivation of sleep, food, fatigue, as well as from the terrifying scenes before her.

Each of the young braves grasped one of her limp hands and placed it for a moment upon his head, their faces hidden in the grass; then, with deep awe expressed upon their features, they replaced the hands upon her breast, sprung erect, turning their faces, and casting their eyes skyward, whirled half about, and slowly advanced toward the center of the camp, some ten feet apart, chanting in low monotonous tones their death-song, its guttural notes sounding strange and weird upon the night.

The brothers of the principals in this strange duel now advanced, and led them to the middle of the vast circle of stoical warriors. Neither was more than twenty years of age, and both were models of strength, and panther-like in their liteness.

They were brought face to face with each other, two athletic sons of the llanos, and the eagle glances of each shot hatred into the other, but neither of them quailed a muscle, as their brothers grasped their left arms and lashed them together, as high up as the elbows, with stout cords of buffalo hide, in such a manner as to preclude the possibility of their breaking away from each other. A knife was placed in the right hand of each, the brothers withdrawing some distance and jerking similar knives from their belts. Then the signal of battle and certain death burst from the lips of Nis-ti-u-na.

Up into the moonlight flew the knives. Lightning-like flashed the steel, until at length a thrust through the vitals of his opponent, by Ki-an-ce-ta, was followed by a fierce downward blow from the other, cutting through the side of his adversary's neck.

For a moment only did the duelists sway in their tracks; then the death-yell gurgled out feebly, and both fell dead. According to the custom of the Comanches, had either been left alive, the duty of his second would have been to run his ready knife through the heart of his ill-starred relative.

Not a sound was heard throughout this entire scene. The stoical faces of the vast circle manifested not the slightest emotion from first to last.

The duelists were buried on the same spot where they fell—buried with the customary death-dance; and left, bound fast together, to rest in peace in their bloody grave.

All this time our friends in the tree watched the ceremonies and the conflict with deep interest.

Words cannot express the relief of Chase, when he saw that Stella was looked upon with reverence; this proved that she was in no danger from her captors, although it was to be feared that she might succumb to the horrors that surrounded her. did they not succeed in rescuing her before she was borne to the far-away village of the Comanches, on the Salt Fork of the Canadian river.

Single Eye had met Rolling Thunder in many fierce fights, and he was agreeably surprised to learn that he had been killed. He knew also, from the speech of Nis-ti-u-na, that the minute-men of Young county had met the Comanches in battle, and had defeated them; still he could not account for the appearance of Stella Stearns on the plain at night.

But now, what was to be done about rescuing her? Had the scout been alone, he would not have been much troubled in regard to the matter; for, if the Indians made a move to the westward, he would follow them, and he

was confident that he would be able to steal the beautiful captive from the village.

Judging that the war-party they had left on Pecan Bayou would join the Comanches who were now encamped below him, he felt much concern, and feared that there would be great difficulty in any attempt to get Stella from the camp. The presence of Chase, Fox and Wolfe embarrassed him; yet he could not expect them, feeling as they did, to lie idle, while he was working toward the desired end. He felt great sympathy for Chase but he realized that they must soon leave their perch, and steal down the stream toward their animals, for the morning was now approaching, and they would most assuredly be discovered. For himself, he might, as he said, "skin through hunk," but the boys would have no chance.

"We-uns 'll hev ter levant, Chase," whispered Single Eye; "ther red hellyuns 'u'd like mighty well ter scoop us in, an' hev a fust-class tortur' circus hyer. We've gut ter slip down outen this mighty slow an' easy, er some on 'em 'll hear us. Ef we c'u'd run in at Belknap, an' git ther boyees on fresh stock, what c'u'd make a speedy run, I c'u'd glide in, git yer leetle gal under my arm, under ther kiver of a stompede six-shooter charge, I reckon, an' then we c'u'd all skute back ter ther fort. Howsomever, ef ther pesky devils we see'd on Percorn Bayou sh'u'd join this hyer batch, they mought skute down, an' jist raise merry Chris'mus with ther Belknap folkses. We-uns hes gut ter keep our peepers open fer jist thet sort o' move. Ef they makes hit, thar'll be a purty good show ter get ther leetle gal, fer they'll take all ther braves they kin spar' fer ther war-path down-stream. They won't think o' takin' ther Child-o'-ther-Moon, es ther fool cusses calls her, when they glides down crick arter revenge. Thet's—"

Single Eye was here interrupted by a piercing yell which proceeded from beyond the river, on the southern plain, and which brought every brave in the camp below to their feet; many of them, after the burial, reclining upon their blankets.

The yell was answered by Nis-ti-u-na, and then the old scout addressed his companions in a whisper:

"Boyees, ther cussed condemned kiotes from Percorn Bayou air a-comin', an' while they air sort o' excited below, we'll get up an' git down ther drink toward Skip. Ther ole gal air likely ter be worrigated some in her mind, but hit can't be helped. Hyer they come, boyees! 'Nough on 'em ter hash up all Belknap folkses, an' eat 'em fer breckfus, ef they gut ther drop on ther burg. Great Jehoshaphat! I hope Stella won't woke up until arter she's gut 'cuperated. I don't think they kin git ready ter skute ter-night, an' we kin git word ter ther folkses. Fox kin ride down thet-away. Say, boyees, how does yer like ther circus down yander?"

The boys were speechless, however, and well they might be.

Five minutes after the signal yell of approach, the head of a wild-eyed mustang brcko through the fringe of bushes on the southern side of the camp, near the river, followed by the head of a Comanche chief, the same being thrust forward; then man and mustang shot clear of bushes, showing the breast and arms of the chief ornamented with silver flagree.

The principal warriors followed in a long line; a hundred and sixty hideous braves, in the belts of many of whom were fresh scalps, the coarse shock of the ranchero or vaquero, the long hair of women, and the silken curly tresses of innocent children, all of whom had been murdered or tortured by the merciless fiends—proofs of a hell of suffering, torture, misery, grief, anguish, and death!

The Indians in the camp hastily formed in two parallel lines, between which the new arrivals urged their steeds.

"Sah-on-ke-no (The Fox) is welcome!" cried out Sa was-sa. "Kam-se-la-um-ko has gone to his fathers. Many braves have gone on the lone dark trail. Their spirits whisper in our ears. They cry out for vengeance. War-cries shall sound where the long knives (cavalry) used to sleep. The thunder-guns (artillery) have gone to the big Salt Lake (Gulf of Mexico.) The war-path is open. Rolling Thunder has sent to the Comanches a white squaw. She is Big Medicine. She is the Child-of-the-Moon."

The newly-arrived chief had separated from his warriors, who disposed of their animals on the west side of the opening, and was standing

near the couch of Stella Stearns, as the chief addressed him. The latter portion of the information was calculated to throw him into a frenzy of rage, for Rolling Thunder had been his greatest friend.

A howl that was most unearthly broke from his throat. He jerked his knife, circled the blade in the air, and then gazed in superstitious awe upon the silent form of the "Child-of-the-Moon," who still lay in a comatose state, unconscious of what was transpiring around her.

Sah-on-ke-no sunk to his knees, and examined the prominent marks made with the Indian ink; then rising, he cried out, in mingled amazement, joy, and reverence:

"Waugh! Child-of-Moon, heap big medicine!"

Single Eye and his young tenderfoot pards could wait no longer, for gray streaks shot up to the eastward. So, carefully descending the tree, during the bustle that was occasioned by lariatting the recently-arrived horses to grass, they stole on, down the river, toward their own animals.

CHAPTER XVII.

A FOX AT THE FORT.

THE big heart of Belknap Bill swelled in his broad breast, and almost suffocated him, while it was only by a most powerful effort that he restrained his tears, as he saw the insane actions and the desperate plunge of the two brave boys into the Brazos and the arms of death.

Not less affected were the brave borderers of his command, who stood, their wives and children gathered about them, on the bluff; the latter gazing in mingled horror and dread apprehension, as the thought that perhaps their own loved protectors might die as terrible deaths as had poor Tom Gaines and Jim Johnson.

All knew that the wounded men had suffered a thousand deaths from the poison which darted its terrible stings through their veins, and that death was a great relief and mercy to them; but that which affected the witnesses of the fearful tragedy most was to see the wives and little ones of the poor men rush, with frantic screams, down the trail, past the spring, and over the open level to the river, where they bent over the bank in horror, gazing down into the waters which had carried their loved ones rapidly, and forever, from their view, into the jaws of death!

Loud cries rent the air, and tore through the hearts of every one on the bluff; but all felt that the affliction of the widows and orphans was, for the present, past sympathy—not so much by their loss merely, for all on the border were continually face to face with death—but from the agonies the poor fellows had suffered, and the heart-rending manner of their taking off.

The disappearance of Stella Stearns, so mysterious and so sudden, was, for the moment forgotten; but the very tragic scene which the minute-men had witnessed, led their thoughts to the authors of the present grief and misery, and then, the thought burst upon them afresh that, in all probability, the pride of the burg was in the power of the merciless red devils up the river.

Those who had been in the desperate fight gathered about Belknap Bill, with stern, hard looks upon their faces, glanced inquiringly into his, which expressed the most intense longing for revenge, while he gazed westward, as though his eagle glance could pierce space and timber for the score of miles that divided him from the camp of the prairie pirates.

And as those sun-browned bordermen, all of whom had been bordermen in boyhood, those roamers of the llanos, in whose ears had sounded the war-cries of all the tribes of the great Southwest—as they stood thus gazing at their leader, eager to hear him yell, "To horse!"—out from the bottom timber to the west, and over the level toward the bluff, dashed a strange youth at headlong speed, his horse all flecked with foam.

All stood in surprise, as this young man rode up the steep trail, directly toward the minute-men, jerked his steed to a halt in their midst at the same time touching the brim of his sombrero, as he said:

"Good-morning, gentlemen! I believe this is Fort Belknap. As it is the only settlement, I cannot well be mistaken."

"Kerrect," said Bill, quickly and anxiously. "Whar did yer come from, an' what's ther good news?"

"I came from up the Clear Fork, and I bring news that will not be considered good, I am afraid."

No sooner had the words, Clear Fork, come from the lips of the stranger than every man pressed around him, Belknap Bill in two strides reaching the shoulder of the panting animal, when he threw his arm over the neck of the beast, and looked up into the eyes of the new arrival, as he asked, in a deep hoarse voice:

"Stranger, did yer see ther han'somest angel of a leetle gal, on a black boss, goin' west'ard on ther full streak, her face chuck full o' funeral looks?"

"Do you mean Stella Stearns?"

The mere mention of the young girl's name by one not known in the burg seemed sacrilege and the fact that the unknown youth should know who it was that Bill meant, astonished every one.

"Ya-as, that's her," was the impatient answer. "Ef yer hes see'd her, er knows anythin' 'bout her, spit hit out speedy. How come yer ter know her name?"

"Stella Stearns is a captive in a Comanche camp," said the young man hurriedly. "The Indians are at least one hundred and sixty strong, and this morning, before daylight, another war-party of about the same number joined them, coming from Pecan Bayou. My name is John Fox, and I came from Boston, with two of my friends, Mr. Chase and Mr. Wolfe; all of us having been friends of Stella Stearns and her father since we were children. We came expressly to visit them. Single Eye, the scout, guided us from San Antonio. We came near being captured on the Bayou, by the war-party who came in on the Clear Fork this morning. We saw the capture of Stella Stearns; and looked in on the camp, after she was brought in from the plain. They will not harm her, for they believe her to be "Big Medicine." Single Eye killed two Indians on the Bayou, and together with the help of his horse, we made way with five more up-stream who were on the spy.

"Single Eye is sure that Belknap Bill and his men have had a fight up river, and killed a large number of the red fiends, among whom was the noted chief, Rolling Thunder. This information we gained by listening to the speeches of the acting chief. The Indians now meditate an attack upon this town in force. Where is Belknap Bill? I wish to confer with him, and then get something to eat and a change of animals."

Never were men more astounded than were the "citiz" at the news brought by the tenderfoot from Boston.

"This air Belknap Bill, leetle one," said one of the minute-men; "an' ye're kerrect 'bout thet fight up ther stream. Hit war blue blazes an' stompedin' chain-lightnin' for a few flectin' periods, yer better b'lieve."

"Happy to meet such a noted and brave man," said Fox, extending his hand, which Bill grasped in a hearty squeeze. "Single Eye sent his regards to you, and bade me tell you that he will watch every step the reds take and inform you through myself or one of my friends. His plan is for you to secrete your horses on the south side of the Clear Fork, cross on foot and ambush the Indians, but only firing a few shots. Then gain your horses and gallop down-stream to some point where you can play the same game, and repeat the operation, if necessary, to this point. The old scout says that a few men can defend the trail here at the bluff and prevent the Comanches from entering the town from toward the river, and four or five men in each of the log-cabins on the border of the burg, north and west, will prevent them from gaining entrance there. There is a big crowd, but a few well-armed men can harass and force them to retreat by judicious management and well-aimed volleys. Now let me ask, how came Stella Stearns to be out on the plains alone, and at night?"

"Wa-al, Mister Fox," exclaimed Bill, "her dad tuck a suddint streak ter glide 'long of us on a bufler hunt, an' soon as he see'd ther animals he went plum lunny, an' struck fer his fust meat on ther whiz. Ther red heathens jist then come up on ther stompede, an' we-uns yelled at Mister Stearns an' skuted ter ther crick an' cross. We-uns doesn't know ef ther reds captured him, but he hain't bin see'd since; an' arter ther scrimmage, when we comed in without him, Stella she went wild, an' off in a dead faint. I tuck her hum, an' Marm Dean she said she'd fetch her 'roun', but in the mornin' she had levanted on my black boss. We-

uns 'spected she'd gone ter hunt fer her dad, but we war goin' ter hump ourselves on ther whiz arter her, Injuns or no Injuns, soon es we c'u'd kerral fresh nags. Now I'd like ter know what Single Eye an' Chase 'spects ter do while we-uns air mixin' up ther beathen es they glides down ther Brazos. What's ter be did 'bout gittin' Stella, an' findin' out whar her dad has disappeared ter? Hit air 'nough ter make us all lunny tergether, ther way things is workin'!"

"Single Eye and Chase propose to run in on the reds that are left behind to guard the camp," explained Fox, "and rescue Stella. Then they will cross the river, gallop down, screened from the view of the Indians by the timber, and make their way into the town. Then there will be four of us to assist you in keeping the fiends back, if our lives are preserved. Wolfe and myself will keep you informed, as Single Eye suggests, but he advises you to advance up-stream as soon as you can prepare for hot work. The Indians are furious at the loss of their great chief, Rolling Thunder."

"Ef we-uns bored thet cuss, hit war a mighty good day's work," said Bill; "an' we'll celerbrate hit when we hev driv' ther sculpers t'other side ther range. But, pards, hyer's a boyee what hes rid right through on a streak ter fotch us informashe what'll mebbe so save this burg. We're full o' trouble, but we kin gi'n him a few honest yells, 'specially es he hes showed thet a fresh on ther frontier kin work in biz thet counts heavy, an' saves ther lives o' weemin an' babies. Whoop 'er up! Does yer hear me, boyees?"

Three rousing cheers for Fox surprised and frightened the women and children at the river bank, who supposed that the Indians were coming, and would cut them off from the town. They therefore rushed in great confusion toward the bluff, gazing in dread upon the bottom timber.

"Now we've bin an' gone an' done hit!" said Bill, in self-condemnation. "Thar's two weemin an' some half-dozen children in thet stompede, Mister Fox, what hef jist see'd ther men make a clean jump inter ther Brazos—the last jump ther poor boyees ever'll make. They war p'isoned by ther arrers o' ther pesky piruts up river, in ther fite, an' hev bin wuss tortur'd since then ef they'd bin sculped an' toasted by ther reds. They went plum crazy, an' committed susanside, with pure pain an' madness. Some on yer take Mister Fox, an' gi'n him feed and drink. His boss must be keer'd fer, an' another fust-class crittur gut ready fer him. Jack, change ther gear onter my bay nag, an' fotch him roun' ter ther Post-office. I'll hev ter see ther weemin an' 'splain matters, an' kinder cheer up ther widders an' orphins o' Jim an' Tom. We-uns must take keer on 'em, an' they sha'n't never want fer meal er meat, es long es Belknap Bill crawls this yere yearth. I sw'ar I didn't think when I ordered them yelps thet ther women 'ud be a leetle "off," an' ther yelps, too, an' not 'zactly preperate fer ther 'casion. I b'lieve I must be gittin' a leetle "off" myself. My brain-box hes bin crammed wi' sich hellish biz an' trouble, since we-uns went on ther dang'd bufler-hunt. Hit would 'a' bin all hunk ef we'd left Mister Stearns hum, es I 'vised et ther start. So-long, Mister Fox! Ther boyees'll take keer o' yer, an' I'll see yer ag'in 'fore many candle-snuffs."

Speaking thus, in a hasty manner, Bill set off with quick step down the trail, to meet the women and children, calm their fears, and, in his honest, sincere way, console the afflicted; besides informing them all in regard to Stella's being captured, and the probability of her rescue by Single Eye, who was well known and highly respected at the Fort.

Fox was treated like a prince by the minute-men, as far as this could possibly be done, and in half an hour was astride of a beautiful bay horse of speed and endurance belonging to Belknap Bill, when he bade good-by to all, the minute-men waving their sombreros from the bluff until he disappeared in the undergrowth on the opposite side of the Rio Brazos.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

WHEN Single Eye, Chase, Fox and Wolfe finally reached the point where they had left their horses, they found the animals with drooping heads, half asleep, having torn sufficient of the

tall, rich grass on the border of the "open" to satisfy their hunger.

Skip-lively, however, was an exception, for she seemed like her master in every respect, and was lively and wide awake as ever, her one eye darting glances of reproach at the old scout for having so long deserted her.

It was now near sunrise, and their present position was one of great danger, as the Indians, after the excitement caused by the arrival of reinforcements, would, without doubt, think it strange that the down-river scouts had not turned up to report, and the chief would send a party of braves down to look for them.

"Git yer tricks an' traps tergether, boyees," ordered Single Eye, "an' we'll skuto 'cross crick, fer ther bellyuns air lier'ble ter drap in on us without sayin' 'How-del' most any time; for Sa-was-saw'll send some o' ther young braves down ter see what's come o' ther spies what they hed keepin' sich a sharp lookout this-a-ways."

The young men worked with a will, and were soon ready.

The stream was then forded, and the scout led the way to the extreme verge of the curve of timber which formed a horse-shoe bend on the Clear Fork, where, in the dense thickets, they could secrete their animals, a perpendicular bank at this point securing them against danger or attack from the north, the open plain extending as far as eye could reach, east, south and west. Consequently no lurking spies would follow them, except through the dense bottom brush to the northeast and northwest, which points could easily be guarded, should danger be expected from that direction.

Hastily devouring a breakfast that had been prepared at their first camp on Pecan Bayou, and some barbecued beef which they had also on hand, it being dangerous for them to start a fire, Single Eye spoke:

"Boyees, one on yer must go es fast es hoss-meat kin take yer ter ther fort, an' tell Belknap Bill ther hull biz we hes disklivered, an' ther gin'ral persish o' things, 'specially es regards ther leetle gal. Bill hed better fotch his fighters right up crick an' ambush 'em every chance he can git 'tween hyer an' ther fort. He kin skute up on this side o' ther drink, leave his nags, an' glide over an' gi'n ther bellyuns a few shots, then stompede 'cross ter ther hosses, jump ther animals, an' git down-stream a mile or so ter a favor'ble persish, where he kin salt 'em. Which on yer'll go? Hit's gut ter be did direc'ly, 'fore any o' ther trailers hes bin sent out below this pint. Yer better draw straws—ther shortest levants fer ther fort."

As the reader knows, Fox was the one who drew the shortest, and, being instructed as to the report he must make and the direction he had to travel, he set out, after a hearty "shake" from each of his pards.

The safe arrival of Fox, and his report to Belknap Bill, have already been recorded. After he had left, Single Eye ordered Wolfe and Chase to lie down and "snatch a few winks," and he would guard the camp toward the northwest, that being the only point at which immediate danger was to be apprehended, as the Indian camp was up the river.

Any scouts sent down in search of the missing braves would probably follow the trail of the latter directly into the opening where the five all lay dead; and then, filled with fury and a desire for revenge, they would study the "sign" most carefully, and in all probability come direct to the ford.

Single Eye knew that it was only a question of time—that the boys and himself would most certainly be trailed up; and either killed or captured, did they not keep constantly on the alert.

Here the old scout's knowledge of Indian character served to keep him cool and unconcerned, although he kept his senses strained to the very utmost.

He knew that when a young brave struck the trail, he was filled with delight at the prospect of being raised higher in the estimation of his fellows, and of gaining a scalp, or scalps that would count in his favor as a warrior, besides giving him an item to work into his death-song.

The great jealousy between the braves would cause any one of them who might discover the trail of the whites to keep the knowledge to himself, in order not to jeopardize his own chances for distinction. There was always hope in this.

Chase and Wolfe were now hardly able to stand upright, from the almost continuous travel and privation from sleep which they had endured for two nights and a day, and to which they had not been accustomed. Had they not possessed the utmost confidence in Single Eye, believing him to be invincible, and capable of outwitting any body of Indians, they would not have dared to lie down, within hearing of the yells of more than three hundred war-painted Comanches. As it was, they threw themselves upon the sward between the scattering thickets, without fear, and almost immediately fell into a profound and death-like slumber.

Single Eye passed to the southern edge of the timber, and gazed out on the prairie to the

west and east, but all was still, and not a living object within the scope of vision, except the scores of buzzards that soared, mere specks, over the Comanche camp, the trees hiding the bodies of the dead Indians from the view of these carrion birds, whose strange instinct, however, told them that the food they craved lay below. The old scout was about to turn, and make his way back through the bushes, when he naturally swept the winding line of timber, west toward the Comanche camp.

With a grunt of surprise and gratification, he retained his position; for, out from the ribbon of dense trees, dashed half a score of braves, riding in a crescent curve, some forty feet apart, and followed by more than two hundred mustangs and mules. Other braves soon made their appearance at each side of the herd, until at last all the animals of the war-party were on the plain, tearing up the grass with avidity, and surrounded by a guard of two-score of Indians. These sat on their mustangs, with loose jaw-strap, each allowing his own beast to feed, as he scanned the plain with a watchful eye in every direction.

The surprise which caused Single Eye to give vent to his feelings in a grunt, which was peculiar with him, was so increased that he was forced to clap his hand over his mouth, sit down, roll over, and actually get upon his hands and knees and tear up the long spears of wild rye that shot up between the bushes, with his teeth.

"Dog-gone my 'Merican heart!" half-whispered, half-spoke the old scout, in soliloquy. "Ef ther cantankerous cusses ain't a-playin' right inter our han's, I'm a-chawin' centerpedes fer grub fer ther nex' six moons. They hes foun' out thet ther nags air in too poor condish fer a good run, an' so they hes shoved 'em out ter grass. That proves thet they doesn't think they hes gut sich a soft thing on ther Belknap folkses, an' mought hev ter git up an' dust, ter save thar bacon. 'Sides thet hit proves thet they ain't thinkin' o' skutin' down crick 'fore dark comes ag'in."

"Single Eye, ye're a ole fool," boxing his own ears, as he spoke; "fer yer acts wuss, a dang'd sight, than a nigger with ther water-milyun colic, an' on ther war-path et thet! I wish I hed Skip hyer ter laugh with me, fer she kin laugh 'thout any noise, an'—Jerusalem! can't thet critter fight reds! Hole on, yer ole one-eyed curmudgeon! Keep cool, an' make out yer programme fer bu'stin' ther bizness of ther cusses wi' ther all-fired jaw-breakin' names. What a gay lot o' tombstones they'd be, wi' thar peculiar cogs chisel'd onter 'em! I ain't a-needin' nothin' o' thet sort onter mine. All ther Texans gut ter do when I air planted, air ter carve an eye on ther stun they sots over me. Everybody kin read thet, I reckon, Injuns every bit es well es white humans."

"But hyer I am, makin' a boss fool o' myself, when I orter be a-workin' things up. Fox hev gone arter Bill an' ther boyees, but they won't git hyer-a-ways 'fore afternoon, 'thout somethin's done ter stompede 'em up crick; an' by thet time ther won't be no show ter play my leetle game. Ef Bill war hyer wi' his minute-men, I c'u'd take 'em, an' bu'st up ther hull Curmanche lay-out, by cuttin' in 'tween ther herd and ther timber, an' stompedin' ther hosses, 'sides wipin' out the red sculpers es is guardin' ther nags. Hit's ther bestest lay-out fer biz, with a leetle fun an' a heap o' revenge mixed in, thet I ever see'd, an' hit's gut ter be tried."

"I'll sen' Chase er Wolfe with this extry infermashe ter ther fort, an' Bill will come jist a-b'ilin'. Ef I kin keep ther bottom cl'ar o' red scouts, so thet ther chiefs doesn't git ter know ther Belknap boyees air a-comin', we-uns kin work ther game, sweep ther board, an' bu'st up ther hull blessed biz o' ther cussed scarifiers. Hit's gut ter be did, an' Skip kin take a han' in their circus. Blast my hidel! Hyer I've bin wastin' time hevin' a lone council, an' some pesky painted bellyun may hev crawled inter camp, an' perferated the in'ards o' ther boyees with a sculpin' knife while they hes bin dead asleep!"

Ending his soliloquy thus abruptly, while an anxious look came upon his countenance, Single Eye crawled cautiously upon hands and knees under the bushes, worming his way with quick but noiseless movements, being careful not to break a twig, or swish a branch. Soon he was in a position to peer in between the leaves, to the small clear space where Chase and Wolfe lay sleeping. So deep was the slumber of the two youths, that it would have taken a volley of artillery to awaken them; they having been deprived of their usual rest such a length of time, and not yet accustomed to taking their repose with one eye open, so to speak, and ready to bound to arms at the slightest noise, as prairie men are obliged to school themselves.

The old scout with difficulty repressed an ejaculation of surprise and deep concern, the existing facts corresponding so nearly to his previous surmises, muttered to himself at the outer border of the timber: for, approaching the sleeping youths, crawling upon hands and knees, with savage hatred and extreme exultation imprinted upon his paint-daubed face, and

flashing from his snake-like eyes, was an Indian brave, the blade of his long scalping-knife between his white teeth, and his lips curling away from them in perfect consonance with his whole expression and mode of approach.

The Comanche was not six feet from the young men when Single Eye discovered him; and he was not coming along the trail that they had made, as the old scout had expected the reds would approach, if at any point. The sleepers were exactly opposite the position of Single Eye directly north; and the savage was crawling from the northwest, in such a position that should the scout make the slightest movement, or show but a small portion of his form, the attention of the Indian would be attracted, and the death of the youths would be certain, before any interference was possible from Single Eye.

But knowing Indian character so thoroughly, and detecting that the brave was young, probably on his first war-path, the old scout felt sure of being able to save Chase and Wolfe, although he was ten feet away from their forms when the red assassin arose to his feet, clutched his glittering knife, and stood facing the sleepers, his form erect, his breast swelled out with exultant pride, as he saw before him, within his grasp, two scalps, two trophies that, when in his belt, would pass him, young as he was, into the council circle of warriors, on an equality with those who were thrice his age, and had been on a score of war-paths. Visions of future greatness and rank filled his mind, imaginary whoops of welcome and commendation from chiefs rung in his ears, and for a moment he stood erect, his head proudly poised, as if he were about to do a heroic deed, in place of a most dastardly and cruel murder.

Quickly he recovered, however, and thrust his left foot forward, raising his right hand, in which was clutched the long, murderous blade, high in air, over the slowly heaving breast of Charles Chase—over the heart that, sleeping or waking, beat only for Stella Stearns, his darling, with whom in his dreaming he now walked the shady paths of the classic Boston Common.

With a bound like that of a panther, his eye blazing with hatred and fury, his muscles strained to the utmost, the old scout sprung from the bushes into the middle of the open space his terrible bowie in his hand; then, with another wild bound, he dashed upon the back of the half-bent brave, just as the knife of the latter was plunged downward, causing the steel to swerve from its course, barely scratching the skin, and pinning the clothing of Chase to the earth.

On the instant that Single Eye struck against the savage the former thrust his old sombrero over the mouth of the latter and pressed it firmly as he plunged his bowie-knife to the hilt in the Comanche's side. He then as quickly jerked it from the gaping wound.

With cries of terror that were half-stifled with sleep, Chase and Wolfe endeavored to arise, their horror-stricken eyes beholding two struggling forms that trampled over them as they lay, while showers and spurts of blood flew all around, as, clutched by the vise-like grasp of Single Eye, the young brave squirmed and twisted spasmodically in the death agony, his gurgling death-yell smothered by the sombrero which the old scout still held tightly over his mouth.

But for a moment was this awful scene presented to the amazed and horrified view of the two young Bostonians; then the paint-daubed blood-reeking assassin hung limp and lifeless in the arms of the one-eyed scout!

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CHASE ON THE PLAIN.

STELLA STEARNS, when she left Fort Belknap, galloped westward through the darkness, the line of timber alongside of which she sped being but a shade darker than the surrounding gloom.

So affected was she at the probability of her father being killed or captured by the merciless savages, so filled was her mind with dread imaginings connected with him, that she banished all fears of personal danger; although the occasional shriek of a panther, the howl of a wolf, and the weird hoot of an owl, were sounds that would at any other time have caused her to shudder, even were she with male protectors. But now, notwithstanding that she was galloping like the wind through Egyptian darkness, and was conscious that her fleet steed was bearing her toward dangers that would cause even Belknap Bill to hesitate and seek cover before approaching, she harbored not one thought of abandoning her wild purpose, resolved fully that she would ascertain the fate of her parent at the risk of all dangers, even capture or death.

On dashed the sable horse, the pale face of the maiden and her white robe flying over the plain, and seeming like some hasty visitant from another and a holier sphere, sent to rebuke the savage horde for their fiendish, dastardly crimes.

Thus on for nearly two hours—hours that seemed years to the eager, anxious, half-crazed girl—and then the blackness vanished, the bright, silvery moon slowly arose in the east,

and casting the shadow of herself and horse in dark *silhouette* out over the plain, and covering the pit in which her father was now battling with horrors that tortured his weak brain beyond endurance.

But Stella knew nothing of that, and better was it for her, and for him that she did not; for she would, unknowingly, in her mad excitement, dread, and terror, have betrayed him to an awful death.

One thing, however, she did know, or was almost positive that she was correct about; and that was, that the ribbon of timber ahead marked the creek that ran into the Clear Fork, and up which, as she had heard, her father had dashed after the buffalo. Every word that she had overheard from the man in the bar-room was impressed indelibly upon her mind; and she was now almost certain that she was fast approaching the last place at which her father had been seen by the men of the fort.

But not five minutes had elapsed since even the smallest blade of grass and tiniest flower was plainly revealed by the moonlight, which seemed, as Stella discovered the creek, to be an augury of hope, when the bright, peaceful prairie was at once transformed into an earthly Hades, by two score of hideous Indians, lashing their half wild, snorting mustangs out from the dark green shades of Clear Fork, and speeding over the prairie toward her; their wild fiendish yells driving hope from her heart, and filling her brain with a horror that almost bereft her of all sense!

She clutched the flowing mane of her horse, and as after a moment her mind became clearer and she realized that the noble animal had increased his speed, a faint hope of escape was born in her brain, and for the first time she perceived how foolish she had been to brave danger and death alone, and by night, on the prairie, when, by waiting patiently until daylight, Belknap Bill and his men would themselves have risked their lives to ascertain the fate of her father.

Was her gallant steed equal to a gallop back to the fort? She had often heard Bill boast in regard to the speed and bottom of his black favorite; and that he would not fear a hundred Comanches, mounted upon him, if he had but a hundred yards the start. But she was forced to remember that the animal had already been overtaxed, and that probably the mustangs of the Indians were comparatively fresh. Should she be captured, what would be her fate? She dared not think of this possibility—ay, probability—without a shudder of horror, and cold chills ran over her.

On she sped, there being no need to urge the noble beast, as the terrific yells, and the sight of the horde of demon-like Comanches dashing in a quartering course to intercept him, caused the intelligent animal to increase his far-reaching bounds.

Stella at length decided that the Indians could not cut her off from the timber of the creek, and she thought that, if she could cross this bottom, and the stream, and gallop down the same to the Clear Fork, fording the river, that she could then turn east, toward Fort Belknap, and possibly escape.

The terrible danger that threatened her caused her to meditate with more reason than before, and she saw that under the circumstances, it would be simply madness to search for her father, did she not discover his dead body on the opposite side of the creek, near the point at which he was last seen by the minute-men, as they had dashed through the timber to escape the overwhelming charge of the two hundred yelling Comanches.

And, as she thought of what the terrible feelings of her father must have been, if the Indians pursued him, as they were now doing herself—as she with these thoughts in her mind, gazed to the southeast, toward the whooping red fiends, her face the pallor of death, her lips parted in dread apprehension, her hair flying wildly, her black steed, just escaping death, bounded directly across the corner of the "sink hole" where crouched her father, surrounded by horrors, both real and imaginary, gazing with staring eyes, and palsied tongue, and ghastly face upward, as, like a flash of light, his loved daughter shot past his peculiar prison.

As has been mentioned, had she known of the presence of her parent in that dark chasm, she would doubtless, on the impulse of the moment, have betrayed him to a death of torture.

But the Fates decreed otherwise; and Stella sped on, ignorant of having been within a few feet of the loved father whom she sought, and longed, with such insane longing, to clasp to her breast!

Then the sable steed dashed madly into the timber, the speed of the animal was due as much to its terrible thirst after its long and rapid run, as to its fright at the sight and yells of the Comanches; and the fair girl, when the horse sprang into the shallow stream and proceeded to drink with such avidity, realized at length that she was lost, for no urging was noticed by the over-exerted, thirst-maddened beast. For the first time she struck the horse with her riding whip, even in her desperate condition regret-

ting that she was forced to do so, but the poor animal appeared to be oblivious to the blows. Stella now recalled the fact that some of the Indians had parted from the main body, and galloped directly to the creek, aiming evidently to strike the timber below the point at which she had entered it, and she now began to understand the meaning of this move.

They would cut off her retreat toward the Clear Fork, south, and thus render escape impossible. Again she struck the horse a stinging blow, and the animal dragged its legs slowly through the water, but still kept on drinking. Stella heard plainly the crashing of brush directly behind her, and her heart sprang to her throat, and prayer to her lips; but at the same moment, her steed struggled up the opposite bank and through the undergrowth, the exultant yells of the Indians sounding clear and appalling, as they discovered their intended victim.

With a shudder of horror convulsing her frame, the terrified maiden once again brought her whip into use, and her noble black responded, dashing clear of the timber upon the open western prairie, the vast plain, now untenanted, but which, a few hours before, had been a sea of bison.

She shot glances up and down the creek, for the sward was cropped close and level as a floor, making it impossible for even a rabbit to conceal itself; but no trace or sign was there of her father, and yet she was confident that she was speeding over the very ground where he must have been when the war-party reached the creek. She heaved a sigh of relief, for certainly the body of her parent was not within view, and there were grounds for hope that he had escaped.

But, if there was hope for him, Stella soon saw that there was none for herself; for, coming toward her, like fiends just let loose, were a half-score of war-painted Comanches not a hundred yards away, and her noble black was now running in a wavering, staggering lope, that told but too plainly that the race was soon to end.

Turning her eyes upward, Stella prayed fervently, and, as she did so, the rush, and snort and pant of over-run steeds filled her ears. She felt herself torn roughly from her saddle to the earth, and then her senses floated into dark oblivion!

When next the poor girl became conscious of her surroundings, she was again upon her horse, the animal walking slowly toward the Clear Fork; and, riding at either side was an Indian, each supporting her in the saddle, and both, as she gazed at them in horror, seeming to be governed by feelings the very opposite to what she had expected—clasping her arms, as it appeared to her, lightly and respectfully.

The war-party followed in the rear in silence, and those of them who attended her were richly ornamented, having eagle-plumes in their hair, held in place by beaded fillets, which caused Stella to suppose that they were the chiefs, or at least, warriors high in rank.

Not a word was spoken, but the silence of the painted horde seemed more awful, more impressive, more ominous, to Stella, than even their terrible yells. Soon they passed between towering trees, and were in the Comanche camp; and now the fair captive was forced to conclude that, through some means unknown to her, through something which must have occurred while she was insensible, the Indians had changed in their feelings toward her.

It was strange and unaccountable, but nevertheless indisputably true, that those who had brandished their weapons in the air, and yelled in mad exultation at the prospect of capturing her, and with a thirst for blood both in action and voice, that was unmistakable, now treated her with the greatest respect, as they proceeded to spread robes, form a couch, and assist her gently to the same. Stella was mystified; but a mountain of dread was removed from her mind. Surely, if she continued to receive such respectful treatment, she might find some means of escape.

However, the flitting, hideous forms before her, the camp resembling fancy's picture of the Inferno, were so horrible that poor Stella was in a constant state of mental torture. It seemed strange to her that she could sustain herself, that she could retain her senses under the fearful ordeal through which she was passing; strange, that she could look upon such a scene, and not die in horror. But the one bracing purpose that supported her, was to ascertain if her father was a captive.

She believed that, had he been slain, she would have seen his remains on the plain; and, as she had not been able to detect any trace of him in the camp of the Comanches, she had renewed hope that he had escaped, and had probably returned to Fort Belknap after her departure.

This thought filled Stella with regret and self-condemnation, for her worse than foolish attempt to find her lost parent in the night and unattended.

This night ride of hers had ended, as she might have foreseen, in her capture by a horde of ruthless savages; and might lead to the death of many of the brave men of Fort Belknap, who would be sure to follow her trail, and

attempt to rescue her at any hazard. Had Stella known that the eyes of four friends, good and true, were looking down upon her in anguish from one of those towering trees across the "open" from her position, and that one was no other than Charles Chase, who had been so seldom, even amid all her anxiety and horror, absent from her thoughts, it would have been difficult to determine her feelings; but she would no doubt have been filled with much deeper regret and dread concern, to know that he whom she held in her heart of hearts, was in a position which caused him to be liable to death by torture before her very eyes.

Stella, however, had not much time for thought. The preparations for the terrible duello froze her eyes, and chained her attention upon the two young braves who, although she was not aware of the fact, were doomed to death in consequence of her wild act.

When the knives were placed in their hands, the signal given, and the red blood spurted through the moonlight, Stella Stearns gave a stifled cry of horror, and again sunk insensible, remaining in that state through all the noise and commotion attendant upon the advent of Sah-on-ke-no and his warriors.

CHAPTER XX.

VIEWING THE GROUND.

"BOYEES, keep yer chin-music ter yerselves," said Single Eye, quickly and apprehensively, as he scalped the Comanche spy. "I wouldn't wonder if thar is half a dozen o' ther sneakin' critters crawlin' roun' ther bottom, atween this an' ther openin' whar we an' Skip salted ther t'others las' night. Ef I hadn't kep' my peeper on extry biz, yer'd both on yer bin goners, an' yer ha'r hed bin a-hangin' on this red's belt; 'sides thet he'd 'a' levanted back ter camp double quick, an' this hyer timber would 'a' bin chuck-full o' reds inside o' fifteen minutes. Hit war all my doin's, howsomever, for I tole yer ter take a snooze; but I reckon now we'd better hustle round lively. Chase, jump yer critter, an' levant down-stream quick as yer hoss kin throw legs, an' tell Bill ter fotch up his boyees at stompede speed, er we'll lose ther bestest show ter break up this war-party ther ever war open!"

"We kin stompede every critter that wears four huffs, and leave 'em without nags, jist es easy es rollin' off a log; an' we'll do bit, of Bill kin git hyer inside o' an hour an' a half. I'm sartin dead sure on hit, an' yer kin tell Bill so. Hit's a open game, an' I plays ter win. Don't spar' yer hoss, for thar's a plenty o' animiles on ther perrarer, what I calkerlates ter kerral. If yer meets Fox, tell him ter slip offen his nag, an' wait until yer comes back. Thar ain't no reds 'tween this an' the Fort, so ye're all O. K."

The old scout rattled off these directions in a low voice, and before he was half through speaking, Chase had, from the manner of Single Eye, decided that life and death to all, Stella included, hung by a hair, and depended upon his faithfully carrying out all the instructions given him. Horrified though he was at what he had just witnessed, he sprang into an adjoining "open," saddled and bridled his horse, and bounding upon him, galloped madly down the river bottom, along a trail that had been made by the buffaloes, praying most earnestly that the terrible experience which had driven him almost insane would soon be past, and his darling rescued from her dread and hellish surroundings.

The horrors through which he had passed were far more awful than he had ever even dreamed could be practiced, or perpetrated, by those having the semblance of humanity. He felt sure, however, that Single Eye had discovered a way by which the small force of whites could defeat the combined war-parties; but he was too bewildered, upon awakening from his death-like slumber, to understand, by the words of the old scout, anything in regard to what the plans of the latter might be, after stampeding the horses of the enemy.

He knew that he must meet Belknap Bill as quickly as possible, and that the sooner the latter, with his men, were at the bend with Single Eye, the better for all concerned, so he drove spurs, but cautiously guiding his horse clear of the timber where the river swept northward at such an angle as to cause it to be impossible for the Indians on the plain to the westward to observe him.

But we will leave Chase hastening for the minute-men of Young county, and follow up the further actions of the old scout.

When he returned to the "open," Wolfe stood, in a stupefied state, his face expressing the greatest apprehension; as, with rifle cocked, he faced the point where he had been told by Single Eye, that danger was the most likely to threaten them.

"Thet's bizness, Wolfe," said the old scout in a low tone; "an' hit's jist ther persish I'd liketer hev yer keep until I shows up; fer every dang'd skulkin' red on this side o' ther camp hes gut ter go under, er else this ole perrarer-dog turns up toes, an' sheds ha'r onnat'rally. I've gut ter butcher some o' ther condemned kienes on ther sly, without 'lowin' 'em ter spit a death-yell, er else our little biz air bu'sted. Take keer o'

yerself an' ther nags. Come ter medertate on hit, I reckon yer'd better git ter a persition nigh Skip, an' she'll help take ary a red what mean- ders hyer-a-ways, in outen ther wet. So long, Wolfe; I'm goin' fer long ha'r on ther jump, an' I'm chuck full o' lectricity!"

The manner of the old scout did not belie his words, for his single optic blazed with fury, and his movements were quick, nervous, and full of vim.

He jerked loose a lariat from his saddle, his blood-reeking bowie still grasped in his hand, and dashed across the "open," then cautiously entering the dense undergrowth, every sense upon the alert, he proceeded half-bent, being careful not to make any noise.

The discovery of the spy, and the desperate encounter that followed it, had aroused all the fierce hatred in his nature—and quickened his desire for revenge for many dastard deeds which had been brought uppermost in his mind by his recent experience; and the fact was forced upon him, that, should any of the spies gain a position from which the approach of Belknap Bill and his men might be seen, that all was lost, and that probably the boys from the fort, as well as himself and his youthful pards would be massacred. He reasoned that the brave he had just killed must surely have discovered the corpses of his fellow-warriors, slain the previous night, or he would not have followed the slight trail he and the boys had made, as he would naturally have supposed it to be the "sign" of some of the war-party who had been riding through the bottom; therefore, the old scout worked his way to his camp of the previous night.

The bodies of the slain were in the same position in which they had been left, but the keen eye of the old borderer detected "sign" which proved conclusively to him that the brave he had recently killed, or some other, had been at the scene of the night struggle. Leaves, upon which the blood had dropped, coagulated, and dried, had been displaced and overturned in places; and everything was as plain to Single Eye as the words in a book would have been to others, who could have detected nothing in this.

The scout had no doubt in his mind that other spies were in the vicinity, who were in quest of the missing braves sent out the previous evening, and who now lay dead at his feet, and he also felt sure that these trailers would soon "strike" the "open," discover the slain, and like the first, seek out the trail of those who had killed the night guard.

Having arrived at this conclusion, his senses at the time being quickened to the utmost, Single Eye glanced overhead along the course of the trail which he and the boys had made, and gave a grunt of satisfaction. With hasty, agile movement, he strode a few paces, grasped the lower limb of a large tree, and disappeared amid the branches, climbing some distance, and selecting a position that commanded a full view of the trail below, and the dead braves; there being, some two feet in his front, a clear space extending to the ground, he himself being entirely screened from view from below, by a thick bough directly beneath where he sat.

Above the clear space, and opposite to Single Eye was a large branch, which the old scout viewed with critical look, for a moment; then he loosened his lasso from his belt threw the knot end over the limb, made a loop in it that would admit both his hands, and not slip; this he left hanging, four feet clear of the limb, and then procuring a piece of fat bacon from his bullet-pouch, which he had brought for such purposes, he rubbed the same along all sides of the noose end of the lasso, to the extent of some five feet from the slip-loop. This done, he coiled the lasso, adjusted the noose for casting, and patiently awaited events.

"I knowed somethin' war wrong wi' me," he muttered. "I knowed thar war a screw loose in my gin'al make-up somewhar, an' I've jist foun' out whar hit air. I hes bin so flusterated, I didn't 'member I hadn't any terbac' in my beef-trap, an' when I hasn't nothin' never goes hunk wi' me. Now, Mister Curmanch', ef yer comes nosin' this-a-way, I'll hang yer up ter dry, er I'll lose ha'r. I'd gi'n my bestest big toe ter take a peep inter ther camp o' ther hellyuns, an' see what air ther condish o' ther leetle gal. 'Spect she's gi'n up ever gittin' back ter civerlize, an' air sayin' her pra'ers frequent an' offen; but ole Single Eye 'll work things ter git her outen ther han's o' ther perrarer piruts, er gi'n up scoutin', an' go ter watchin' sheep an' goats down roun' Casa Blanco."

Leaning to one side and squirting a young Niagara of tobacco-juice into the hole of a woodpecker in the trunk of a tree the old scout became silent, turning his head quickly, and listening intently. The light and almost imperceptible snapping of a twig caught his expectant ear, and he braced himself for a most difficult and hazardous feat; one that would require the most dexterous skill, and on the success of which his life perhaps depended.

But a moment passed after the sound reached his ears, when the bushes on the western border of the "open" parted, and a hideous face burst into view. Over and under the black piercing

eyes, on forehead and cheek, was a large daub of vermilion, which, with the bars of white gypsum, the width of a finger-tip, that were drawn from the under lip down over chin and neck to collar-bone, and extending to the ears from the lower jaw-bone in parallel lines, gave to the face a most unearthly appearance, and one most appalling to those who were unaccustomed to the sight.

The face, and then the whole head and shoulders, projected; the eyes darting rapid glances around the opening, and then to the sward in front, when the face contorted with terrible rage as the dead and scalped braves met the view of the red trailer.

Once more he shot piercing glances in all directions and listened intently, but no sound except the song and flutter of birds and the hum of numberless insects caught his ready ear.

A second glance upon the dead satisfied the cautious Indian that the struggle, which had ended in the death of his brother-warriors, had occurred some time before; and, with bow and arrows in hand, he sprung clear of the bushes, a "Waugh!" bursting from his lips in his amazement and fury.

But slight notice did the trailer take of the dead. More important was it, now that they had "gone on the long dark trail," to trace their slayers—the detested Texans; and the brave went about this important duty, which might win for him honor and fame, with movements which proved that this was not his first war-path.

Half bent and with stealthy and springy step he circled the opening, examining each indication of "sign," and halting to study out the bruised grass, the broken twig, or the crushed piece of decayed wood, until at last he found the trail marked the departure of those who had made less the number of his tribe.

With a low ejaculation of satisfaction, his practiced judgment telling him that hours had elapsed since the whites on their shod horses had been in the "open," he stood for a moment erect, gazing ahead along the course which the trail pointed. He then again bent to earth for a moment, rising with a grunt of disappointment, for he had discovered that a brother brave was also on the trail in advance of him; and the thought that possibly his more fortunate comrade in war might steal upon and secure scalps that he so much coveted was anything but pleasing to his jealous and selfish nature.

But at the very instant that this disagreeable thought came into his mind, Single Eye cast his deadly noose directly over the Indian's head; then, by a dexterous twitch of the slack below the limb toward the trunk of the tree, drew it, quick as a flash of light, tight about the throat of the Comanche. At the same moment, the old scout thrust both hands into the firm loop he had made in the other end, and which was drawn over the limb; he then sprung from his seat, his whole weight upon the lasso, drawing the Indian upward until only the toes of the latter touched the earth, and that but lightly.

Totally dumfounded, and scarcely comprehending the nature of the danger that had come so suddenly upon him, the brave dropped his bow and arrows, and instinctively clutched at the rawhide-rope that was choking out his life. Struggling, twisting, and hastening the bitter end by his terrible exertions to free himself; he clutched the lasso again and again, reaching high above his head, but his grip would not hold. The lithe, sinewy frame of the red trailer writhed, his eyeballs glared and bulged, and his hideous face was convulsed with the agonies of strangulation, while over his head hung Single Eye, twisting and swaying, as he clutched the firm loop, while his head was bent forward, his one eye expressing exultation, which was, however, suddenly changed to extreme surprise and apprehension, for as the strangling victim neared the gates of death, a sound caught the sensitive ear of the scout, and the next instant he saw a warrior bound across the "open," knife in hand, springing forward to cut down the dying brave.

Although Single Eye could see this Indian, the latter did not discover him, for his gaze was bent upon the contorted form of his brother trailer, the position of the latter filling the new arrival with amazement, he being unable to understand or to account for such a suspension, and the branches vailing the old scout completely from his view.

However, the old borderer was not slow in realizing the danger in which he was now placed, for he could not reach a branch or place his foot upon one, as he swayed and twisted over his victim. But his brain was always full of expedients, which flashed through it like the lightning on the Mexican Gulf, and, as if the Fates favored him, the brave, just as he reached the warrior, discovered the mutilated corpses. Only for a flitting moment did this delay him. A stroke of his knife which would have severed the lasso, but that the scout just then let go his clutch and launched himself through the air directly upon the head of the brave.

The boot-heels of the old borderer struck fair on the warrior's forehead, and he went down in a heap, the bowie of Single Eye cleaving his heart in an instant.

The next the reeking blade was plunged to the hilt in the breast of the gasping victim of the deadly noose. The work, for the present, was complete.

CHAPTER XXI.

LABORING FOR LIFE.

HENRY STEARNS found, upon thrusting the Indian lance into the north side of the pit, that the earth was baked hard by the sun. This proved to him that, did he not escape from the loathsome sink-hole some time during the following day, his sufferings would be such as to render him a raving maniac.

There was but a pint of water remaining in the canteen, and when that was gone, Stearns knew that excessive tortures awaited him. The brilliancy of the moon now waned, and gray streaks to the eastward shot up, heralding the approach of day, and the poor man, overtaken by the sudden weakness caused by the thought of what might probably be his fate, seated himself once more upon his dead horse to invent other plans for his preservation, if such were possible. He felt that his strength was not equal to the task of digging through the hard, baked earth; but, as he meditated, he reasoned that the south side of the pit might be softer, as the sun could not at that season of the year strike that portion of the sink-hole.

He sprung up, recovered the lance, and ran across the pit, striking the point of the weapon into the earth.

He gave a cry of joy, for the earth was here soft in comparison to the north bank; but as he gazed upward, and thought of the great amount of labor to be accomplished, he was almost hopeless. Even if he could escape from the pit, it was probable that he would be captured, and put to death by the Indians.

The future was indeed dark, but a new idea now flashed upon his mind, which promised relief from much that had caused him to become almost hopeless. He had not thought before that he could cut out portions of firm meat from his horse, or from that which had belonged to the Indian, and preserve it for some time by burying it in the cool earth. Not only this, but he could stretch a lariat when the sun was high in the heavens, and dry some strips of the horse-meat.

When the water was gone, he could chew raw meat to slake his thirst and strengthen him to carry on the work. Stearns was surprised at the expedients that flashed through his mind, all tending toward causing his condition to seem less hopeless. The stench which he knew must proceed from the dead animals in a very short time after sunrise, had caused him great anxiety and loathing, even in the imagination, and now an idea to prevent this occurred to him, which he wondered had not presented itself previously.

He could spread a blanket, and allow the earth that he excavated to fall upon it; then he could empty that upon the carcasses of the buffalo and horses, as well as upon the corpse of the Indian, thus, for a time at least, preventing decay; and in connection with this thought, he realized that it would not be necessary to dig away a channel, but that a tunnel would do as well, and would not necessitate half the labor. A hole, dug aslant to the plain above, would answer every purpose.

Elated at the result of a moment's thought upon the situation, Stearns immediately set to work to carry out his newly-formed plans. Drawing his knife, he proceeded to remove a large square portion of the skin of the mustang just slain, and then cut out several steaks from the ham of the animal, which he inclosed tightly in the skin, laid in one corner of the sink hole, and then covered it up with fresh earth. This done, he removed the saddles from the dead horses, and laying the blanket used by himself on the ground, beneath the spot where he intended to dig, he at once began to loosen the earth on the south side of the pit, starting a hole of sufficient size to allow of his crawling in easily.

The sun arose and blazed down upon the plain with torturing power, soon shining three feet below the level of the plain, and into the sink-hole on the western side, causing the most intense heat. Stearns, although working with hope, and a strong will to accomplish his purpose, had at this time only succeeded in carving from view to the depth of a few inches, the corpse of the Indian, and one half of the carcass of the bison. He knew that the work of covering one of the dead horses would take him twice the length of time he had been at work in accomplishing what he had thus far, and again he became discouraged.

He found that it was much more tiresome, and he made much less progress as he advanced upward; for he was forced to crawl up the tunnel, and loosen small quantities of earth at a time. He also found it almost impossible to use the lance; and, casting the weapon aside, he dug frantically with his bowie, and pawed the loose earth away like an animal digging its hole. At length, as he slowly moved backward, shoving the earth down with his feet, and reached the bottom of the pit, he to his horror discovered that the carcasses of the horses had

swollen to nearly their natural size. The atmosphere of the pit became permeated with a most sickening odor, and Stearns shuddered with horror at the dread possibility of dying a lingering death from the most maddening thirst and hunger in that loathsome place, breathing in the noisome poison with his latest breath. He crawled madly back, up the tunnel, and hacked and stabbed at the earth in desperation. The nauseating stench arose in the tunnel, and there being no outlet, remained there to torture his sense of smell, and cause a most depressing feeling at his stomach. Although there was but one swallow of water remaining in the canteens, he scrambled back in the pit and clutched it. Then, as the carcasses were swollen still more, the hot sun penetrated still deeper, and the atmosphere became almost unbearable. Alone in a carrion reeking pit, escape almost hopeless, maddened by hunger and thirst, and breathing the poisoned gas that hissed out from the putrefying carcasses; and, if escape were possible, to be hunted at last by hideous fiends, and then slowly tortured to death. Heavens! What a fate!

The hot, brazen sky, far over his head, seemed to be dotted with black specks; and holding his blistered hands over his nostrils, Stearns gazed curiously upward, with an insane longing to fly to the pure air of heaven, to gaze at any view except the dread horrors of his limited surroundings. Hotter and hotter became the air—stifling in that pit on the plain, even had there been no decaying carcasses. Larger and larger grew the black specks in the sky, the same moving in wide circles, and Stearns soon knew their character and object. They were buzzards. The carrion birds, long circling in anticipation of the feast below, were now descending, notified in some manner that their feast was in a condition for devouring. Stearns felt that he was going mad, and an almost irresistible inclination to draw his revolver and blow his brains out, caused him, upon second thought, to shudder with fresh horror. Awful as was the death in store for him, he would not take his own life; and he grasped his revolver by the barrel, and then, with all his strength, hurled the weapon, whirling upward through the air, high above, and falling upon the plain.

Then he again clambered up the tunnel, and dug in frantic haste with his bowie. The result was such as to cause him to be even less hopeful, but he cast the earth below, and continued to toil, even after he found it difficult to retain his grasp upon the handle of his knife. An unforeseen difficulty now almost overcame him, and forced him to enlarge the tunnel behind him. It was too dark for him to work to advantage, for his body almost filled up the passage below; still he proceeded on, until the stench that arose almost overpowered his weak brain. He clasped handfuls of fresh earth, and held them to his nostrils, to prevent, for the time, the nauseating odor from entering his lungs, when a happy thought came at last into his mind. In the pocket of his coat, which was below in the pit, he having cast it aside, was a handkerchief which Stella had saturated with pungent perfume, the previous morning. He now resolved to bind the same loosely about his face, below his eyes, thereby preventing the poisonous gas from offending his olfactory.

But with this recollection, it being closely connected with his daughter, came a thousand thoughts through his brain, in regard to his loved and only child; and he clasped his hands to his hot forehead, striving with all his power of will, to crush down and out all the imaginary horrors that were conjured up in connection with her. He would not, could not, believe that a merciful God would permit his angel child to be captured by the fiendish painted pirates of the plains!

Was he not himself suffering sufficiently, without his mind being tortured by the imaginary woes of others? Yes! He would not think of his darling. He must not, or his brain would burst from out its bony tenement. Surely the Almighty would watch over her and lead her back to friends and safety. Surely the men at Fort Belknap would, as quickly as her absence was discovered, fly in search of her, even did a thousand red-men bar their way. She would be providentially saved, but he was most certainly doomed! However, he felt that, were he not in such a perilous position, were he in a place of safety and surrounded by comforts, he could not hope to live any great length of time. He had tried to impress Stella with this fact, and he now felt relieved that he had done so; for his death would affect her less, from her having been, in a measure, prepared for it. Yet, if she were to know what a terrible death it was, she would suffer untold anguish as long as life was given her. But little chance was there, in his way of thinking, of any one discovering his bones; or, if they did, of knowing who or what he was, or how and when he had died. And he felt that it was better thus. Then, as he threw off these depressing thoughts, and from this fact became more sensible to the dread situation, he crawled in frantic haste down the tunnel into the "sink-hole," which he felt was a most appropriate name, although it

was suggested to bordermen from the earth having sunk, and not from any of its contents.

Stearns made a dash for his coat, which he had thrown aside. The sunlight blinded his eyes for a moment, but his sense of hearing was acute. The loud flapping of many wings in his vicinity broke upon his ears. He sprang upright, but, the same instant, received a violent blow in the face which caused him to drop quickly, not so much from the blow itself, but from the horrible repulsion he felt, as the wings of the disgusting carrion bird flapped in his face. He soon saw that only the birds in his immediate neighborhood had been scared from their loathsome meal. Full a score were still in the pit, perched at different points upon the carcasses of the horses, and the part of the buffalo that was still uncovered.

Poor Stearns was becoming sick as death, for, here and there stretched and torn in every direction, were the entrails of the animals, drawn from the bodies by an art known only to these carrion birds.

The eyes of the animals also had been plucked out and devoured; and Stearns congratulated himself that he had buried the Indian, thus preventing the sight of a mutilated human form from shocking him.

The stench was now intolerable, and he at once procured the handkerchief, and was greatly relieved and rejoiced to find that the perfumed fabric remedied the disgusting smell—indeed, prevented it from being perceptible to his nostrils.

Again he gazed upward, and saw that the pit on all sides, was lined with the foul birds, that, with arching necks, and heads turned to one side, viewed, with gloating eager eye, the loathsome contents of the chasm; while still soaring, in wide circles in the air, were hundreds more, slowly descending with stiff wings toward the point of attraction. Stearns hurled clods of earth, with all his strength, and with quick motion, on all sides; forcing the birds in the sink-hole to fly up to the plain, and while thus engaged he noticed a confusion along the line of buzzards on the edge of the pit.

The next moment, the birds were forced aside, and, peering down upon the carcasses with hungry, wistful eyes, Stearns saw a number of coyotes—the sneak wolves of the buffalo range. The sight of these opened out new possible horrors to the poor prisoner. The night that was to come would bring with its darkness, the "loafers," or black wolves of the plains; and if these animals should chance to be famished, they would spring into the pit, as would also the coyotes, and he well knew it would be impossible for the animal to get out again.

The "sink-hole" would swarm with growling, yelping wolves that would fight and tear at the flesh before them, and crunch the bones, while the flapping of hideous wings, and the sickening stench would transform the silent, uncontaminated chasm of the previous night into a vile pandemonium.

Where would he be then? Stearns dared not think. Possibilities, ay, probabilities, thrice more horrible, repulsive and sickening than he had before thought of, now stared him in the face. He must go mad. He would soon become a raving maniac; and, rushing amid the carrion, reeking beasts and birds, he would be torn to pieces and devoured by the loathsome, horrid creatures! Was there no way to guard against these new horrors?

Yes! He could build a wall of earth at the mouth of his tunnel, leaving a little space at the top for air. The poor man laughed aloud, in insane glee at the happy expedient. He would defy the wolves—he would defy the horrible stench—he would defy death!

The sound of his own laughter appalled him, and he broke off abruptly; the buzzards and coyotes drawing back in affright at the strange sound.

Stearns rushed to the corner of the "sink-hole," dug up his horse-meat, and crawling up the tunnel, buried it in one side of the same, safe from the wolves. The meat was his only hope.

His throat was again parched with thirst, and he again exhumed the horse-flesh, cut off a small piece, and ravenously devoured it in the darkness, endeavoring, and with success, to govern his stomach, by power of will, against expelling the nourishing food. Then again, his bowie flew, and with more desperate force and quickness than before.

Stearns had overcome his weakness, for the moment. But how long could he sustain his forces!

CHAPTER XXII.

TRAPPED.

BELKNAP BILL said all that he could say, in the way of sympathy; and, as he was the man of all men in the burg, his words and reasoning did much to console those who had, in so terrible a manner, been deprived of their loved protectors.

From the fact that the poor women had witnessed the agonies of their husbands during the earlier portion of the night, and had realized that death would be a relief to the sufferers, their grief was less intense, and they were now more

reconciled to their loss; although the dread sight of the tortured men, in their insane actions on the bank of the Brazos, their mad shrieks, and dead plunge into the arms of death, would remain stamped upon their brains, as long as life was given them.

There are no more kind and generous people in the world, than are to be found on the frontiers of the United States; and any human being in sickness, suffering, or want, need go no further than the nearest cabin, to find kind treatment and assistance, even though the giving of the same greatly diminishes, or exhausts entirely the much needed necessities of a humble and isolated home. Therefore it was, that those who had suffered, and were suffering the mental torture consequent upon recent sad tragedy, were overwhelmed with loving and kind acts and words.

In an hour after the departure of John Fox, Belknap Bill, with his company increased to the number of twenty-five, leaving twice that number of citizens, consisting of aged men and young lads, who could use fire-arms with skill, were ready for the trail, and all that might be ahead of them.

Belknap Bill felt no fear in regard to those he was leaving behind being able to defend the town, if the Indians should succeed in passing him while he was going west, by taking the opposite side of the river from that which was traveled by his command.

Strong men bade an assumed careless goodbye to wives and children; but, after the start, many an eye was stealthily and hastily brushed by buckskin sleeve, as a backward glance showed the bluff above the spring to be crowded with the anxious, weeping women and children of the burg.

Half a mile up the river, Bill ordered his men to ford; then south, up the stream, the gallant band sped toward the camp of a savage foe, more than twelve times their number—a foe that gave no quarter except the torture-stake; but every man gripped rifle breech, and with set teeth, and eyes that darted glances along the timber, and sweeping over the plains, dashed spurs.

Having fresh horses, they felt themselves able to cope with the strong force of Comanches, by keeping beyond arrow-shot, and dealing death to the Indians, at long range, with their Sharp's rifles.

Half the distance between the fort and the Comanche camp had been passed; when, flying toward them, like leaf before a gale, they discovered a white man—or, as he approached nearer, they knew that he was quite young, and instantly decided that he must be one of the two who had been left behind by young Fox, with Single Eye, the scout.

This youth dashed up quickly alongside of Belknap Bill, and hastily cried out:

"Gentlemen, are you from Fort Belknap?"

"That's whar yer struck plum center," answered Bill. "Hev yer comed from Single Eye?"

"Yes, sir; and I have information for Belknap Bill."

"That's me, stranger! Reckon ye're Mister Chase, er Wolfe?"

"My name is Chase. You have seen my friend Fox, I take it, or you would not be so well informed. But there is no time for extra words. Single Eye wished me to say to you, to drive spurs, and come at stampede speed, or all is lost. All the horses and mules of the Comanches are grazing on the plain—so I understand by the old scout's words—and under a small guard. The stock can be run off, and leave the reds at our mercy."

"Drive spurs, boyees!" yelled Bill, starting his horse into a headlong gallop. Chase joined at once, and rode alongside; and, without another word, the gallant band of border heroes flew along the outer edge of the timber, toward the Clear Fork of the Brazos, and the Comanche camp.

There was not a man in the command who was not painfully anxious to learn something in regard to Stella Stearns, and none was more concerned on her account than Belknap Bill; but, he feared to speak of her, lest some fact should be revealed that would distract his mind from the planning and performing of the movements necessary to the success which must, he felt sure, open a way to save her from the red fiends.

Spurs were used without mercy, during the time that a clear field of travel was open; for, all knew that the last two miles must be made secretly and stealthily, through the bottom timber, as the Indians who guarded the horses on the plain, would discover them if they kept along outside the timber. On they sped; possibly, as they knew, to death, but none faltered or spared spur. At length they dashed into the dense shades that screened them from the view of any spies who might be on the lookout for their advance up the river.

Eventually they reached the bend within which Single Eye and his young pards from the "States" had encamped, and the old scout was there to welcome them, and most joyous at their early arrival.

"Dog-gone hit, boyees," he exclaimed, rub-

bing his horny hands with delight, as he squirted a stream of tobacco-juice clear over the bushes; "dog-gone hit, boyees, slip from yer nags, take a rest, an' listen. We 'uns hes gut a dead open an' shut game, an' hes gut ther run on ther latch-string. I've gut a young pard, a 'States' boyee, on ther watch, an' be'll report ary move ther red hellyuns makes. Every four-footed critter o' ther hull war-party—both on 'em, I sh'd say—air on ther perrarer, an' ther programme air fer us ter cut in 'tween ther nags an' ther bottom, an' then stompede ther hull lay-out, takin' ther guard in outen ther wet with our shooters. Whar in thunderation air Fox?"

"I didn't meet him," answered Chase, anxiously.

Then, turning to Belknap Bill, he asked, quickly:

"Did Fox start up the river after giving you information?"

"He skuted on ther fly," was Bill's answer. "I gi'n him a fresh hoss, an' the boyees fed him up 'fore he straddled ther nag. He struck 'cross ther drink, an' then up-river, fer we-'uns gi'n him a good-by shake an' see'd him off. Hit's dang'd strange ef he hain't showed up liver-aways, fer he had a good fair start an' a XXX critter. Ther's Mister Stearns, too. Whar, in ther name o' Crockett, kin he be? Ef they'd tuck 'im yer'd 'a' seed' him in ther camp. Mebbe so, ther red beathen plugged him full o' arrers fust off, on ther crick. Must 'a' bin, I reckon."

"What, yer don't mean tersay, does yer, Bill, thet Stella's dad hev bin scooped in?"

"Thet's what I'd like blamed well ter know, fer he war with we-'uns when we fust see'd ther buffler on ther range afore our fight down-river with ther war-party o' Rollin' Thunder. He skuted fer buffler on ther jump, an' jist then ther reds come a-b'ilin'. He war up crick when we hed ter cut through ther timber ter save our ha'r, an' he hain't bin see'd since by nobody. Thet war yisterday, an' hit looks es though he'd gone up, an' ef thet air so hit'll kill Stella dead, sure. She runned off in ther night from ther fort ter hunt him."

"Wa-al, dang my old bide!" exclaimed the old scout. "I reckon Fox hes gut on t'other side ther river, an' jist es likely es not be'll glide right inter ther red hellyuns' camp. Es fer Mister Stearns, we-'uns can't bother 'bout him now. Bill, I hes salted an' took ther ha'r o' every gol-derned painted kiote thet war sent down crick on ther spy; but we-'uns hes gut ter make a reg'lar ole Wa-hoo lunge inter biz on a cyclone whiz, afore they sen's down a big scatterin' ter see what's become o' them. Ef we don't, we mought es well spread ourselves, compose our 'natemies, an' say 'Now I lay me, an' git ready ter climb toward Kingdom Come, fer we hain't gut ther shadder ev a show ter buck ag'in' both them war-parties."

"We'll hev a right smart lope," said Bill, "ter git ther nags stomped Belknap-way an' scoop in ther guard. But hit's gut ter be did somehow."

"Thet's all fixed, Bill," explained Single Eye. "Chase, Wolfe and this hyer ole perrarer-dog 'lows ter skin in on ther north side o' ther camp, an' when you-'uns aire a raisin' a he ole rumpus on ther plain an' runnin' ther nags off, we'll draw ther hellyuns thet-a-way. Then we'll skute in on ther fly, cut a few wizzens, an' skip wi' Stella up ther crick, whar, arter ther stompede, yer kin all jine us. Thar's ther programme fer yer!"

"Thet's hunk!" said Bill with satisfaction and relief. "We-'uns kin Kerry out our part o' hit with a dang'd sight more vim ef we knows thet ye're a-doin' all yer kin ter resky thet leetle angel o' ourn. How long hes ther Injun nags bin t'arin' grass?"

"They glided outen ther bottom 'bout a hour an' a half ago, an' they'll be a-skatin' in ter river in 'bout an other half hour. Hit's time ter start ther game fer life er death. I leaves ther hull thing on ther plain ter yeou, Bill. Come on, Chase an' Fox! We-'uns hes got a heap o' boss scoutin' ter do, afore we gets a peep et thet leetle gal, an' mebbeso some he cuttin' an' slashin' ter resky her. So long, Bill! So long Boyees!" and waving their hands in farewell, Single Eye, followed by Chase and Wolfe, darted into the thick underbrush toward the Comanche camp, the old scout having insured them against discovery by having so effectually "salted" all the spies that had been sent down stream to investigate the disappearance of the Indian scouts who were on duty the previous night.

The minute-men now examined their arms, slid their revolvers more to the front, and then placing their hand upon their saddle-horns, stood ready at the word to mount, and gallop on their hazardous mission; to charge between three hundred braves and their horses, a feat which, if accomplished, would madden and demoralize the Indians beyond the power of prudence, and render them almost helpless, as far as combating successfully with the whites was concerned.

"Git ready ter lunge out, boyees!" ordered Belknap Bill, as the old scout and his young pards disappeared from view. "We'll jist git in line on ther inside edge o' ther timber, an' gi'n Single Eye time ter crawl 'bout two-thirds

o' ther way, 'fore we drives spurs. Mount an' git!"

Not a word was spoken by the little band of border heroes, as all, without confusion, took their positions, mounted and ready, at the border of the undergrowth; where, through the branches, they could view the plain, the large herd they expected to stampede, and the score of Indians that were keeping guard over the same; and who, to give them success, must be shot, and not allowed to rejoin the war-parties within the camp in the bottom timber.

Not more than half-a-mile separated the Belknap Boys from the direct line between the herd and the camp; the animals of the Indians being about a mile from the timber, and surrounded by the guard.

At last the word came from Bill, on the right of the line.

"All ready, boyees?"

"All set!" rung along the line; for there was now no need of silence or caution, in fact the more din they could possibly make, the better.

"Member our p'isoned pards, boyees!" cried out Bill. "Member ther Angelo o' ther Fort! Git!"

On the instant, the five and twenty borderers shot out, as one man; from the screen of branch and bush, and galloped at terrific speed up the Clear Fork, between the Comanche camp and the mustangs.

Not ten bounds had they made from their covert, when wild yells of alarm burst from the guard on the western side of the herd; and as they yelled, they sprang upon their steeds in a frenzy of dread apprehension, fully realizing the disaster and death that threatened them. The warning whoops of the Indians were drowned by the loud taunting yells of the Texans, who now executed a half-wheel to the left, then spread out, ten feet of space intervening between each, and their rifles at ready. As they came within rifle-shot, an irregular fire was opened upon the Comanche guard, and the stampede began amid the wildest confusion. Whoops, death-yells, snorting of steeds filled the air, which was cut by the sharp crack of rifles, and the braves in the camp rushed out upon the open plain, to find that they had been outwitted by a little band of the hated whites. Their rage and fury were beyond expression.

The loss of the herd was insured and hastened by the whoops of the Indians; for, the din striking their ears, and the long line of mounted men in their front, from which burst fire and smoke in loud reports, caused the mustangs to turn eastward, and along with them those of the Indian guard who were yet alive; the minute-men taking advantage of this change of course, for which they had planned, followed up, having the horses of the Indians under easy control.

A dozen of the Belknap boys kept on with the herd, the remainder dashing here and there in pursuit of the terrified guards. Many of the herders had been killed, and the survivors, chased botly by the Texans, dashed here and there, in their fright, helpless, and utterly unable to escape.

All were cut off and slain, within plain view of the whooping, frenzied braves that lined the plain near the timber in a dense crowd; all gesticulating wildly, swinging their weapons in the air, and thoroughly demoralized at the disaster and death so plainly revealed to them.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN THE THICKEST OF THE FIGHT.

SINGLE EYE, Chase, and Wolfe—the two latter close following, and imitating the movements of the former—made their way as fast as the condition of the course traveled would admit, the two youths leading their horses, and Skip-lively walking, with a stealthy step, after her master.

The old scout pointed directly for the entrance of the Indian camp, the narrow neck of clear ground that connected the tree-inclosed opening with the north plain; and Single Eye's object was to get the animals into the thicket, as near to the plain as was possible, in order, if anything went wrong, that they could all mount, and gallop toward Fort Belknap on the open prairie, where he felt sure the Indians could not overtake them. He had unlimited confidence in Belknap Bill, but he knew that the best-laid plans often go wrong, and that the next half-hour would, perhaps, bring to an end the life trail of many—possibly, for all he could tell, his own, or Stella's.

It was impossible to take the animals more than half-way toward the proposed point; and, as this distance, according to his calculations, was reached, the old scout directed the two youths to assist in attaching the lariats from one horse to the other, the same being tied to the bit-rings.

Wolfe was then chosen by Single Eye to remain with the animals, and lead Skip-lively on toward the point designated; the other horses being secured, as described, one to another, and forced to follow in single file. Then, addressing Wolfe, Single Eye said:

"Ef yer thinks yer can't strike plum whar yer wanted, why yer kin jist cut straight thet-a-way"—pointing to the north—"an' yer'll break

bush inside o' twenty yards, an' come out on ther open perrarer. Then yer kin glide right 'long ther edge o' ther bottom, ontill yer gits ter ther trail what leads inter ther camp o' ther reds. Thar won't be no need ter be keerful arter Bill starts his circus on ther south plain, t'other side ther drink; fer ther beathens 'll lunge through ther bush thet-a-way, jist a-b'ilin'. 'Bout thet time, Chase an' this hyer ole perrarer-dog 'll be glidin' right inter brisk biz, an' we'll git ther leetle gal, er bu'st. Ef yer gits ther nags thar hunk, an' we-'uns doesn't turn up speedy, yer kin roll in, an' help us out, ef yer feels bilious 'nough ter cut an' slash inter red meat. So long, Wolfe. Come on, Chase, 'fore ther circus opens!"

With these instructions, the old scout drew his bowie-knife and struck forward, Chase close after, with his blade in his hand also, his face pale, but with a look of reckless daring imprinted upon it, which showed he realized the situation, and would fight like a tiger to rescue his darling.

Single Eye had timed his movements well, for he reached the foot of the tree, from the branches of which he and his young pards had witnessed the bringing in of Stella, and the terrible duel between the Comanche braves, just as the wild yells of the Indian guards broke on the air from the south plain, and the sharp and continuous reports of the rifles of the minute-men echoed through the timber.

Peering through the bushes, they saw the amazed Comanches rush hither and thither like frightened sheep, springing from their couches or squatted positions, where they had sat smoking, from all parts of the camp, and bounding for their weapons.

The Indians sprung into the bushes, and in a wild mob, rushed toward the south plain, which was obscured from view by the bottom timber, leaving the camp, to all appearances, deserted.

Much to the surprise and consternation of the scout and his young comrades, Stella was not to be seen. There was no indication of her presence. The couch of robes was gone.

"Dog-gone my ole 'Merican heart!"

This expression broke from Single Eye in his bitter disappointment, but as the words fell from his lips, he saw a painted face thrust from the bushes on the opposite side of the camp, the eyes gazing in apparent wonder, as their owner listened, with great impatience, to the sounds of war.

"Come on, Chase! Ther leetle gal air on t'other side. I'm a-gamblin' heavy on hit!"

As Single Eye spoke, he dashed on around the camp, and toward the north entrance, close followed by Chase; and then awaiting until the face of the Indian was drawn back, both bounded across the narrow clear space, and made their way stealthily to the west side of the camp, where the head of the brave had been discovered.

They had not far to go, however, when they perceived a shelter made of green boughs and saplings, and around this stood half-a-dozen braves, all listening to the fearful din that filled the air.

"Hyers hefty biz," whispered the old scout to Chase; "toler'ble hefty, er I'm a liar! But Stella air under thet 'wicky-up,' an' she hev gut ter come out, ef thar war forty reds thar. Now's ther time ter giv yer muscles a job, Chase, an' yer knife hes gut ter fly like chain-lightnin'. Dang my cats! Hyers Wolfe; an' I reckon we kin git away wi' them now. Good boyee, Wolfe! I goes fer ther two hellyuns nighest ther 'wicky-up;' Wolfe, skute fer ther outside, an' ef I yells, Chase, yer must grab Stella, an' skute fer ther fort. Air ye ready?"

A look at the youths answered him, for their eyes filled with a desperate, murderous light, as each clutched his knife more tightly, and they braced themselves for the fight, which was to end in death for all, or freedom for Stella Stearns!

Single Eye threw his sombrero to the earth, rolled up his sleeves, and the boys quickly made ready in the same manner as the old scout.

The space between the whites and the reds was clear of bushes, but towering trees reared upward on all sides, and archways of the noble branches were over their heads.

Single Eye raised his knife in the air, while he gazed into the faces of his youthful pards, as he stepped out into the opening, clear from his concealment.

His one eye darted fire, his muscles were drawn, and his teeth set; as, with a step as swift and springy as that of a panther, he glided forward, Wolfe and Chase in a line with him. Only a few paces did they go in this way, and then the three shot forward in a bound, with knives uplifted; and the three blades were driven to the hilt in the backs of the Comanches whom they had picked out for their first victims. No sooner in than out, but before they could again use steel, the other braves whirled, and grappled with our friends.

Nerved to desperation, as was Charles Chase, no man could have stood before his resistless fury. His blood was up. Not his own life merely—that was nothing—but the life of Stella Stearns depended upon his good right

arm; and, like a flash of light, his steel flew, and the blood of his red antagonist spurted over the grass. But as the Indian staggered and strove to keep his feet, he lunged forward and drove with his last strength his long scalping-knife into the arm of his slayer, who sprung aside just in time to avoid being pierced to the heart by the murderous steel.

One glance showed Chase the position of affairs.

Two of the warriors, first stabbed, lay prostrate, muttering, and gasping out their death-songs.

Wolfe was grasped tightly by the Indian he had sprung to meet, neither being able to use their knives; while Single Eye rolled over and over, clutching a burly brave, the knife wrist of each in the grip of the other, while one of the Indians, who were first stabbed, was crawling, knife in hand, toward Wolfe, to assist with his last strength his brother brave. All this, Chase saw in an instant, and the next his blade was buried in the wounded Comanche's side. Then a furious cut caused the Indian who clutched Wolfe to let go his hold, giving the latter great advantage; but, at this moment, the voice of Single Eye, rung out:

"Levant, Chase! Levant! Grab Stella, an' skute! We 'uns 'll sock it to 'em! We'll hash 'em, you bet!"

Even as the old scout spoke, Chase saw that he was astride of his foe with upraised knife, so he dashed into the shelter of the green boughs!

"Oh, God! Charley—my Charley!"

These words rung in the young man's ears from lips that were bloodless and quivering; and eyes, from which feelings of deepest thankfulness had not yet driven the horror and deathly fear that had been caused by the murderous sounds of the hand-to-hand conflict outside, and the terrific din on the plains—these eyes flashed one look into his, from out their ghastly framework, then became sightless, and Stella sunk limp and apparently dead into the arms that had so often clasped her, but from which she had supposed herself parted forever.

With a grating of teeth, and a moan of anguish, and with that white-robed, death-pale maiden clasped to his breast, his eyes glaring and glassy, the blood from his wounded arm trickling over the spotless robe of his darling, Charles Chase bounded over the dead and dying, and darted across the camp, through the narrow entrance, into the bushes.

With ready knife he cut his steed loose, the poor animal snorting in fright at the scent of blood.

With much difficulty, for he was growing weak and faint, he mounted, having first laid the still form of Stella across the saddle, himself springing upon the roll of blankets on the back of the cattle.

He then, while the frightened horse pranced about, clasped the fair girl in his arms, and worked his way into the saddle. Away dashed the steed, with loose rein, while, faint and weak, he yet strove with all his power of will to throw off his faintness, and retain his seat upon the now fast galloping horse. He was forced to clutch, with his disengaged hand, the horn of the saddle; and not one thought of the direction in which his steed was flying, entered his dazed mind. If he thought of it at all, he was satisfied to know that he was speeding away from that hell of sounds—from those demon-like beings, from those bloodthirsty and merciless fiends; and, above all, that Stella was free, and in his arms, although on the border of death-land! He was conscious that the horse was bearing him into cool shades that were grateful and refreshing; then he heard the plashing of waters as the animal forded the river, but no thought entered his mind in regard to the point at which his horse had forded.

Not long, however, was this pleasant coolness enjoyed, for Chase became aware that they were dashing again over a plain, an open plain, down upon which blazed the hot southern sun, and then a strange rumble filled his ears, which increased to a deafening sound like thunder, and forced him from his semi-conscious state. He gazed in the direction of the sound and beheld a sight that chilled his blood and drove all hope from his heart, for, coming like an avalanche toward him, was a vast herd of buffaloes, all in a wild, headlong, unswerving stampede!

As this dread sight met his view, for the first time since the start, Chase caught up the bridle-reins, turned his affrighted horse half about, then drove spurs mercilessly and dashed at terrific speed on ahead of the storm of wild brutes that rushed toward him like a tidal wave of death.

If he turned to the right or to the left he was lost. The plain, trampled by ten thousand hoofs, would show no trace, no sign of himself, his steed, or—his Stella!

A prayer shot out from his hot lips, as much, it is to be feared, in wrath as in supplication, for he was conscious that more anguish, horror, pain, and privation had been hurled upon him than he could bear, and he began to question the justice and mercy of Heaven.

And then, as, sweeping around the curve of a serpentine line of timber, he beheld a horde of Indians, their feathers flying, their lances flaunting and glittering, all coming at break-neck speed over the plain, seemingly to intercept him, and yet another long line of massed warriors on foot, awaiting his advent near the border of the woods—then, as his bare head seemed to be scorching, his brain seething from exposure to the hot sun, he imagined, and not without good grounds, that he was being driven by ten thousand fiends into the gates of Hades. It was indeed sufficiently horrible to craze even the strongest brain; but still he retained his seat in the saddle, staring upon the awe-stricken concourse of Comanches, heedless now of the thunder of the stampede.

But his noble steed quickly saw that escape was open, for ahead the timber made a sharp curve, and gathering its remaining strength, the horse, in far-reaching, desperate bounds, turned in the opposite direction, in a quartering course, dashing into the timber, and into the very midst of the minute-men of Fort Belknap, its tail sweeping over the forehead and mingling with the "mop" of the leading bison on the north side of the stampede!

The waning sight of Charles Chase recognized friends; his wavering senses grasped feebly at the fact that Stella was saved, and then he fell forward and all was dark.

Belknap Bill tenderly detached the corpse-like maiden from the limp embrace of her lover and sprung into the saddle, while Chase was supported by two of the minute-men, and all sped toward Fort Belknap.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WAITING AND WATCHING.

NEARLY three hundred braves, in a frenzy of rage and consternation, rushed here and there, with hastily-clutched weapons in hand, just clear of the timber; a demoralized mob, which the chiefs themselves in a dumfounded and helpless condition did not even seek to control. Fierce, vengeful yells and whoops rent the air from the vast war-painted horde as they witnessed the complete annihilation of the braves who composed the guard, and the wild and uncontrollable stampede of their animals. Hundreds of miles of barren sands, flint and gypsum belts stretched between them and their distant villages in one dreary, desolate plain.

Vast herds of buffalo roamed this plain to the west on their annual migration northward, subject to terrific stampedes that shook the very earth, and crushed everything to powder beneath the tens of thousands of hoofs, flint-like in their hardness.

Civilized man, unaccustomed to border life, could not conceive a scene so terrible as this savage, maddened mob. But that plain in front of the fiendish horde was destined to be the field of display for a scene even more dread than that which was now presented. The Fates had conjured up a scene upon that almost boundless stretch of level prairie, extending on all sides to the horizon, that would cause one unused to these frontiers to disbelieve his eyes and ears—to doubt even that he was upon earth.

Afar to the east dashed the stampeded herd of mustangs; and the minute-men, confident that the animals would continue on their frantic gallop for many miles, even to the vicinity of Fort Belknap, headed for timber, then passed through the same, fording the Clear Fork and stealing toward the Comanche camp amid the undergrowth, terribly anxious in regard to the success of Single Eye and his young pards in their attempted rescue of Stella Stearns, the "Angel of the Fort!"

Belknap Bill knew it would be sacrificing his men to charge into the infuriated mass of Indians who would now fight like fiends to get possession of the horses of his men in order to go in pursuit of their own. He knew also that, should he dash up at long range and safe from danger, and seek to lessen the number of the war-party, they could retire to the dense bottom timber where no bullets could harm them, and where, if he charged upon them, the red-men would have the advantage.

Not only this, but Bill knew that as yet the Indians on the plain in their madness had kept up a continuous yelling which, if Single Eye was with the boys fighting the guard placed over Stella, would drown all sound, and thus favor the rescue of the fair captive; but should he charge, then the two war-parties would immediately rush to their camp, and perhaps prevent the attempt of the old scout, or possibly capture the rescuers.

Therefore Bill resolved upon secret and stealthy movements toward the camp, with the object of getting Single Eye, the boys, and Stella into a safe position before "bushwhacking" the camp in a manner that would insure the decimation of the Indians without risking the annihilation of his own command. Screened from view themselves, the minute-men were prevented from observing what was transpiring upon the plain which they had just left; in fact, the river and a hundred yards of timber and undergrowth lay between them and the vast plain to the south.

However, the Texans had not covered half the

distance from the point at which they had left the plain and the Comanche camp when they were brought to halt by the yells of the Indians, which were changed from frantic rage and vengeful fury, to relief and extreme satisfaction; the minute-men, being used to different outcries from their red enemies, were not slow in noticing the change, and were struck with wonder.

Had the Indians captured Single Eye, Chase and Wolfe?

This questioning thought was uppermost in the minds of all; for in no other way could they account for the change in the terrific yells. But this did not seem probable, as the Comanches still maintained their position on the plain, and this would not be so were their suspicions correct, for the old scout would strike the camp on its north side, and the river and timber would divide him, his pards and Stella from the mob on the plain beyond.

"Come on, boyees! We'll ford ther drink, an' glide ter ther edge o' ther timber! Thar's somethin' goin' wrong, sure es yer borned. Four on yer skute up an' scout fer infermashe regardin' Single Eye an' ther boyees! Ef we doesn't keep our peepers open we'll git kerral'd yit."

Detailing four of his most experienced scouts to look after and assist Single Eye in the rescue of Stella, and to give directions to the old scout as to their movements, Bill led his little band once more over the Clear Fork, and through the timber, and soon had a view of what had occurred.

Never were men more dumfounded, enraged, and struck with apprehension and the deepest concern.

Their well-arranged and executed plan of stampeding the horses of the Comanches, and rendering the latter *hors du combat*, had proved as naught; for, straight ahead of their position, dashing toward their savage masters, was the returning herd, driven and hastened by a burly Indian, who wore the ornaments of a chief, that from afar gleamed brightly in the sunlight.

There was now no hope of effecting another stampede, no use in again attempting to deprive the Indians of their animals; indeed, it would be almost certain death to all to do so, for should he order a charge, Bill knew that before he and his men could reach the galloping animals, many of the red-men would have bounded upon the backs of the horses, and be ready to repel the charge. This was certain, for at least a hundred braves had sped to meet the approaching herd, spreading out in two long converging lines to make sure that the animals did not escape them, and gallop over the west plain.

As these warriors darted, one after the other, some ten feet apart, and fifty in each line, from their throats burst yells of joy and triumph, while, at intervals, loud cries of "Kam-se-la-um-ko!" broke on all sides. The tables now seemed to be turned.

"Boyees," said Belknap Bill, in a despondent tone, "our game's up. They hes stocked ther keerds on we-uns, sure es shootin', an' we're in a tight box. Ef Stella war safe, an' byer with us, we'd cut straight fer ther fort, an' git thar too; but ole Bill ain't goin' ter skute on ther back trail, an' leave ther leetle gal er Single Eye, er ther boyees either, ter be sculped. Ef any o' yer wants ter levant, boyees, yer kin go; I ain't a-holdin' any o' yer byer. Ther bull bizness air bu'sted, an' thar ain't no show fer us. Yer weemin needs yer ter take keer o' them, so levant hum."

Not a man made a movement to go. Belknap Bill was full of anxiety in regard to the safety of the absent ones. He knew that his men were in deadly danger, and that it would be impossible for them to escape if they did not start at once; consequently, when they made no motion toward following his advice, he ordered them to start at once for the fort.

The brave and daring Belknap Boys, however, when they understood that their leader intended remaining, and that no dash was to be made toward the main object of their scout—that is, the rescue of Stella Stearns—all flatly refused to go, and even advised Bill to cool down, select a good position, and get ready for defense. This was a new departure.

Belknap Bill gazed quickly out from the bushes, first fixing his eyes on the Comanche horde, who, with the most intense excitement, were gesticulating wildly, as they caught and saddled their steeds, while the air was filled with cries of fury, yells of command, and exultant shouts.

Guided by the gestures of the excited braves, Bill cast his eyes to the southwest, and his honest face beamed with joy and relief as he cried out:

"Boyees, we-uns held ther deal, stocked ther keerds, an' slung ther pictur's in this leetle game, but they run in a cold deck on us. Hit come nigh bein' ther last game we-uns ever war ter take a hand in; but ther red bellyuns what war thinkin' up ther bestest way ter tortur' us, hev gut thar hands chuck full o' biz 'bout now, an' I reckons ther Belknap boyees'll not wilt inter ther'r butes this trip. Pards, thar's a big war-party o' 'Paches comin' jist a-b'ilin'! I don't

'zactly b'lieve ther good Lord hes anythin' ter do wi' sich scum, butthit does 'pear es though He sent 'em ter gi'n we-'uns a show ter resky Stella, an' all on us git outen ther scrape.

"Fox said Rollin' Thunder war salivated et ther fight we hed, fu'st off; but it looks es though he'd bin layin' low all ther time, a purpose ter turn thet stompede. I wish't I knowed 'bout what's bin done by Single Eye an' his boyees. Mebbe so our pard's'll turn up purty soon. Ef they doesn't, we'll go up an' take persesh o' ther camp o' ther cussed kiotes, an' set thar tricks and traps a-fire. Jist gaze at 'em, boyees; hit's good for sore eyes. Ef we-'uns hain't gut free-tickets ter a slam-up, fu'st-class XXX circus, I'm out o' place on this yere yearth. Ha'r orter be cheap from this on."

It was indeed a most terrible sight, such as few white men ever beheld, and promised to end in wholesale carnage, and fiendish deeds of both the parties who were about to engage in a combat where quarter was unknown, and death in the most horrible forms was on every side.

Over that stretch of prairie, dashing toward and within less than three miles of the Comanches, was a war-party of some three hundred gypsum-daubed Apaches, this white paint of the plains causing them to appear more unearthly and hideous than Nature had made them, which was truly unnecessary. In a long, wide-spread column, four deep, on they came. On, urging their wild-eyed mustangs at terrific speed, insanely eager for Comanche blood and scalps. Along the line of timber that marked the course of the Clear Fork, extended in battle array the warriors of the resurrected chief, who had so mysteriously turned up in time to save his braves from total destruction. The two chiefs now dashed up and down the front of their bronze war-painted braves, urging them to recall the warlike deeds of their fathers, and to imitate them in the coming desperate fight.

But the day was pregnant with the most sudden and startling changes; for, while yet the braves of two terrible tribes, then at war with each other, although next-door neighbors, were two miles apart, a rumble like distant thunder fell upon the ears of all except the Apaches, who were, from their great speed, and the sound of their own charge, unable to detect it, but who were soon warned by their sight, of the thundering bison stampede, and some fifty yards in advance, a steed fleet as the wind, and bearing upon its back a youth, ghastly in face, who clasped a white-robed maiden to his breast, her arms wound about the neck of him who sustained her.

The scene was a terrible one. Belknap Bill and his men all recognized in a moment Stella Stearns and Charles Chase, while the Comanches saw before them "Child-of-the-Moon," the Big Medicine so recently sent them from the clouds. As the red-men realized that it was she, their reverence and superstitious awe were redoubled; for they thought she had brought the stampede of buffaloes between them and the Apaches to save them from death. But of all the savage horde, none were more impressed than the great chief, Rolling Thunder, who owed his life to Stella; and as two-score of braves broke from the line to save her, he waved them back, and dashed furiously down the line to keep his warriors in order; for he honestly believed, and so did the entire war-party, that she was safe from all harm—that the Good Spirit guided her horse, and would protect her.

The very earth now trembled, as with an earthquake; and, around the bend of the river from the northwest, a dark compact mass of buffaloes dashed in a terrific stampede, their red tongues lolling, the long hair upon their heads flying, and their eyes bloodshot, and glaring with an unknown terror.

On came the terrible sea of brutes, with no break in it; the peculiar rolling motion of the animals having the appearance of ever and swift changing waves.

On dashed the dread bison stampede, directly between, and entirely filling up the space between the Apaches and the Comanches; and not only this, but forcing the former to whirl their steeds and dart away toward the south to prevent being trampled, man and mustang, into the earth. Although eagerly charging to almost certain death from lance, or deadly feathered shaft, or murderous knife, yet they shrank, more than all, from that thundering avalanche of brutes, with fear and terror.

But of all the dread features of this scene, that which, from the first, chained the attention of the Comanches, and filled them with amazement; which caused the hearts of the minute-men of Fort Belknap to almost cease beating, and their eyes stare in horror, was a madly plunging, terrified horse that bounded ahead, carrying upon it Charles Chase and Stella Stearns, the "Child of the Moon!"

And although it seemed at first to all that the fair girl, as well as the companion of her flight, was doomed to be trampled to a shapeless mass by those thousands of hoofs, yet, fleet as an arrow from a bow, and guided by the firm-nerved youth, the gallant steed shot, in a quartering line, into the timber, its tail actually mingling with the long hair on the forehead of

the first bison bull in advance, on the extreme northeast corner of the herd.

The Comanches were now forced back, close to the line of timber, far below the point where the "Child of the Moon," shot from view, and were there held, as it was impossible for their animals to break through the tangled net-work of briars, vines and bushes.

Belknap Bill and his men stood in their tracks, dazed with horror, and incapable of motion; in fact all realized that they were as helpless as babes, as far as doing anything to save Stella and Charles was concerned. But soon these feelings were changed to the most intense relief and insane joy; for, directly, toward their covert, pointed the horse with its precious burden.

"Mount, boyees, mount!" yelled Bill. "Mount an' git ready ter whirl an' p'int fer ther Fort!"

The next moment the horse crashed into the timber, and grasping Stella from the arms of the now fainting Chase, Belknap Bill again yelled:

"Two on yer hold Chase fast! Spur! boyees, spur deep, an' p'int fer ther Fort, er ther red bellyuns'll kerral us! Spur deep, er we-'uns an' ther Angel air goners!"

And spur deep they did, two men supporting Chase, while all dashed through the timber, over the stream, then to the northern plain, turning east, and flying, like a cloud of dust before the gale, toward Fort Belknap.

CHAPTER XXV.

ROLLING THUNDER RESURREXIT.

ROLLING THUNDER had no doubt when, at the head of his braves, he discovered the minute-men of Young county afar over the vast sea of bison, that he had the whites at his mercy. Proudly he had been gazing over the far-stretching ocean of brutes with the air of a king. He had waved his hand to draw the attention of his braves to the extensive herds that the Good Spirit had created for the Comanches, and while thus engaged his piercing eye had caught sight of the detested whites, the intruders on his vast hunting-grounds, the despoilers of his noble game, upon which the comfort and lives of his people depended.

The instant that the men of Fort Belknap caught his eye his quirt cut the air and his war-cry sounded. Then on dashed the hideous horde, not more than four or five riding abreast, in order to hide their numbers as they advanced, and also the more easily to pass through the thickly-packed herd.

A vast herd it was, extending as far as the eye could reach, from south to north, and from the creek that entered into the Clear Fork to the western horizon. It was, as has been said, a most imposing sight, far beyond, in terrific grandeur, anything that could be conceived by one who had never witnessed such an exhibition of nature's wild herds, and in its silent, regular, slow-moving state, it would impress the beholder with awe, fill his mind with admiration, wonder and extreme amazement, causing a man to deem himself to be as unimportant, as insignificant as a grain of sand upon the sea-shore, or to create some such feeling as rules one upon viewing some towering cliff, the rushing, breaking waves of a stormy sea, that in the far-off horizon blend with the murky sky.

Dreadfully imposing is the wild stampede of a hundred thousand buffalo, and not much less so are the same animals, when, thickly packed, they slowly move over the plain at easy walk, as they migrate, as was the herd of which we write.

While traveling thus, it is not a difficult matter to cut through the brutes, as only those of them in your immediate vicinity can see you, and they slowly turn aside, swerve, and cause a crowding of the advancing animals. Were the beasts in a run, however, those in front would be pressed on over whatever threatened, as those in the rear see not the danger.

Rolling Thunder and his warriors were nearly through the herd when they discovered the whites; in fact, they were on a foray toward the Texas settlements, and found but little difficulty in forcing their way onward, by pricking with their long lances the animals in their front, the gap which the war-party made closing up in their rear, they being entirely surrounded by bison.

The noted chief conducted the chase with his usual judgment; but, as has been said, he had no doubts in his mind in regard to his success in defeating and massacring this little band of whites, their hasty flight increasing his confidence in his success. This very confidence was his defeat; for, harboring such thoughts, he did not for a moment suspect that the Texans would dare make halt and face him under any circumstances; consequently, as we have said, and as has been seen, he suffered great loss, his braves falling thick and fast beneath the unerring aim and deadly, flashing, fast-shooting guns of his hated and despised pale-faced foes.

In the midst of the desperate charge through the bottom timber, when the cunning chief had made the attempt to cut the whites off from their animals, his judgment leading him to suppose, and truly, that the Texans would not leave their horses where the beasts would be

endangered in the conflict; when the smoke of battle filled the timber, and leaden hail hurled on all sides, and the death-cries of his braves burst upon his ears, Rolling Thunder felt the sting of a bullet in his shoulder, and then another cut through the back of his neck among the muscles, partly paralyzing him. Then the thought flashed through his brain that he was almost helpless, and perhaps being borne by his frenzied mustang into the midst of his foes, he fell forward, clasped his arms around the neck of the fast-bounding animal, clinging with desperate clutch, another bullet at the same time glancing along his skull.

However, with that strange and unaccountable power which a savage, man or beast, seems to retain until the last breath is drawn, even clinging to his or its foe, when to all appearance already dead; so clung the Comanche chief, while his snorting, frantic mustang dashed through the underbrush, screened from friend and foe, by battle-smoke, plunged into the river, forded it, cleared the intervening timber, and then, in far-reaching bounds, its neck outstretched, and the jaw-strap flying loose among its wild, fluttering mane, the steed pointed down the river toward Fort Belknap, urged on by the dread vocal pandemonium, and crack of rifles in its rear.

On shot the affrighted steed, striving in vain to shake off the motionless but tight-gripping load upon its back, the legs of Rolling Thunder clinging with set muscles around it, the arms of the chief so tightly clutched about its neck that breathing was difficult.

The chief was now bleeding profusely, and his eagle-feathers were broken and torn by the bushes, his hair was in wild disorder, his face and arms scratched, while little streams of gore ran from his wound, down the neck and shoulders of the black mustang, coloring the white flecks of foam that flew from the mouth of the galloping steed to a crimson hue, and giving to both man and beast a most horrible appearance.

And thus, as described, was the condition of the pair, as the blown, fatigued horse once more entered the cool shades, this time a score of miles from the scene of the fight, and on the Brazos; the refreshing air, fanned by the rush of steed and swish of bush, partially revived the wounded Comanche chief, and he placed his hands upon the shoulders of the mustang, and forced himself to a sitting posture, blood-stained, wild with pain that betrayed itself only in the sunken glaring eyes—almost crazed, for he knew not his whereabouts, and had but a dim idea of what had occurred, and with a dull leaden pressure upon his brain, blocking all attempts at thought.

A most unearthly and horrible picture was this paint-daubed, blood-stained savage, one side of his head, from the crown down, being entirely free from hair, and the bare scalp drawn over with bars of vermilion and gypsum; while, upon the other side of his head, was a rank growth of coarse, black, glossy hair, extending below the waist, plaited for war, with tiny, glittering silver ornaments in its meshes.

This was the living, moving picture that was presented to Stella Stearns, as the mustang crashed through the undergrowth, and awakened her from her sweet slumber amid the waving flowers and verdant grass on the bank of the Rio Brazos, beneath the towering timber and gracefully waving vines.

And Stella sprung to her feet, as has been recorded, frightening the already terrified mustang the more, causing the animal to whirl and plunge on the back course, hurling Rolling Thunder to the earth.

The reader knows of the actions of the "Angel of the Fort" afterward; how she procured food, liquor, bandages, and healing salves, dressing the wounds of the half-dazed chief, who gazed upon her with awe, struck dumb in superstitious wonder at the sight of such an angelic being, and her solicitous care of himself.

And, when she had disappeared, the flow of blood being stopped, and the strong liquor bracing his frame, he felt stronger, and the death-song that trembled on his tongue became husked, the loss of blood and consequent weakness causing him to fall into a deep sleep.

Rolling Thunder was awakened by cheers and yells, and upon listening, he soon discovered that they proceeded from the throats of his hated enemies, the whites.

Not until now had he fully comprehended where he was; but, upon crawling to the edge of the timber, where the moon swept in a crescent curve through a level opening, opposite, or to the southeast of Fort Belknap, the chief realized that he was in great peril, for the bluff above the spring swarmed with minute-men, their wives and children, and as he gazed he saw a white youth dash down the government and stage road to the level, and then point directly toward his position. Hastily the chief stole back to his former resting-place, grasped the bottle of brandy, and poured a large quantity of the fiery liquor down his throat, also saturating his wounds with it; then he thrust the bottle into the ornamental paint-pouch at his side.

He next secreted the basket which Stella had brought, and carefully removed all traces of his presence.

This done, he stole into the dense undergrowth, and crouched beside an old buffalo-path, which, he reasoned, the white youth would follow on his return, rather than through the thick bushes.

This was his only chance of escape—he must secure the horse of the approaching youth.

The Good Spirit would lead the white boy past him, as He had sent the beautiful squaw to bind up his wounds. The chief knew that he could not reach his braves, or his camp, on foot, weak as he was, and he felt sure that his presence was greatly needed; for he knew not that the whites whom he had observed on the bluff, where the "long knives" used to live in their stone lodges, were the same with whom he had battled, the same who had given him his wounds.

Only for a few moments had Rolling Thunder to wait for Fox was eager to return to Single Eye, and his friends, and after fording the river, the young man dashed directly into the trail where the hideous chief crouched in wait for him.

The latter sprung erect on the left of the trail, grasping the bridle-rein, and then raising his scalping-knife in the air, he drove the steel into the shoulder of Fox who, struck with horror at the sudden and unexpected appearance of such a fearful form, threw himself forward and downward, thus preventing the knife from plunging through his vitals. It was, however, a dangerous wound, and a faintness came over him.

The knife was withdrawn, and the next instant would have been buried to the hilt in the heart of the white youth; but the thought of the white squaw's having saved his life, and that the Good Spirit had sent this youth with the horse, caused the knife to be replaced, and Fox fell senseless into the bushes.

Rolling Thunder, with a "waugh" of relief and satisfaction, managed with difficulty to climb upon the captured horse, which was a better formed and more fleet animal than he had ever before bestrode; but fearing he would be discovered by the whites, should he take to the plain, he prudently made his way through the timber, forced to go slowly on account of his wounds, and the weak state in which they had left him.

Many miles did he thus travel before he guided his horse out on the south plain, being forced to halt at one time, and secrete himself and his steed, for a party of whites passed up the river, armed to the teeth, and evidently bent upon meeting his warriors in battle. This urged him on, as soon as he considered it safe for him to do so; and he traveled upon the plain, being forced to keep on the edge of the timber, and follow the windings of the same.

It was while thus traveling that out on the plain he discovered the stampeding horses and mules—animals that he soon decided must belong to his own braves; and, as he fully comprehended the position of his war-party, now deprived of their animals, and at the mercy of their white foes, he was almost overcome with a fit of furious madness, and drinking an other long draught of the brandy, the chief urged the noble steed he had stolen out on the plain at headlong speed, determined to turn the stampede, and save his braves from destruction.

This would have been a very difficult thing to accomplish, had not the animals already become fatigued and less frightened. Rolling Thunder forced the herd to circle southward, then westward, and then to head to the northwest—the chief, with wild whoops and yells, causing them to dart over the plain, on the same trail that they had come, arriving just as death and destruction hovered over the massed Comanches, who, from yell and gesture, had recognized their chief, sent back, as they now supposed, by the Good Spirit, from the land beyond the moon, to save his people.

Doubtless the Comanches would have fled in a demoralized mob, upon discovery of the approach of the Apaches, had not Rolling Thunder returned to them; and even then, all realized that two-thirds of their number would give the death-yell before the sun sunk in the west, as the fight in prospect would be to the bitter end, with their most reckless, daring, desperate, and revengeful neighbors and enemies, the Apaches.

However, wonders came upon the Comanches thick and often, and none were more struck with superstitious awe than was Rolling Thunder himself, who knew not that he had remained in deathly, unconscious slumber—for a whole night, and a part of two days.

The feelings mentioned ruled the minds of all, as they saw the desperately-plunging horse, upon the back of which was a strange white youth, who bore in his arms Child-of-the-Moon, leading down between them and their fast approaching merciless foes, thousands of buffaloes, in a thundering stampede, that forced the Apaches to turn and fly over the plain to the south in terror and confusion.

Not one of the Comanches now doubted that

they had been saved by Child-of-the-Moon; that she had led the bison at the proper moment to prevent the loss of many braves, and Rolling Thunder, as he recognized the fair girl who had bent over him and dressed his wounds, was most deeply impressed, and would not permit one of his braves to follow Stella and Charles, saying solemnly:

"Let my braves throw themselves on the ground, and hide their faces in the grass, for the Good Spirit sent His child to save your chief. Rolling Thunder would be with his fathers, but the daughter of the Good Spirit tied up his wounds, and made him well."

The assertion filled the braves with increased wonder, and doubled their feelings of reverence in connection with their beautiful captive, who had, it would seem, left their camp, they knew not when or how, to benefit them—ay, to save them, in all probability, from total destruction.

"The white face squaw is the 'Child of the Moon,'" asserted Nis-ti-u-na. "She has been in our camp since she came when the moon rolled up from the big water of salt. She is Big Medicine. She flies in the night, and in the day, and has saved the death-yells of our braves from scaring the owls and the coyotes of the Clear Fork. It is good. She will come back. She has saved our warriors. She has saved our chief. It is good. She is Child-of-the-Moon. She is Big Medicine. Nis-ti-u-na has spoken."

At these words, Rolling Thunder was dumfounded. There was no doubt now in his mind, that the "Big Medicine" which, in the traditions that the old men of his tribe related, was to be sent by the Good Spirit to save his people from destruction—there was no doubt in his mind that this "Big Medicine" had at last arrived, and was a white maiden, the one who had saved him, and hundreds of his braves from death! Child-of-the-Moon was an appropriate name. His warriors affirmed that she had come from the moon, and the chief doubted it not.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A FRESH DISCOVERY.

THE Comanche warrior with whom Single Eye was engaged in deadly hand-to-hand conflict, as Chase clasped Stella Stearns in his arms and staggered to his horse for the purpose of flight, was a very strong and supple brave, as the old scout soon discovered; for the latter was taxed to the very utmost to prevent the Indian from stabbing him to the heart.

As the reader already knows, the struggle, in comparison with previous like efforts on the part of Single Eye, had lasted for some length of time, when the old borderer ordered Chase to seize Stella and fly. By bobbing his head around and recovering as quick as a flash of light his former position, the scout had not only seen that Chase was bearing off in a senseless condition toward the hiding-place of the horses, but he detected by the movements of the youth that he was in a very weak state, and seemingly, from some cause unknown to him, liable to faint.

He also realized, from the length of the struggle, that Wolfe was in a fair way to come out "cold meat," and these discoveries nerved Single Eye to an irresistible desperation.

He had been, by an adroit and unexpected movement, thrown off from the position of advantage astride the Indian's body, and both now lay clutched, side by side, upon the sward, panting with exertion, the solitary eye of the old borderer blazing with hatred, and the Comanche brave somewhat appalled by the tremendous strength and activity of the old white man, and from recognizing that he was battling with the noted scout, who had but one eye, and who had slain so vast a number of his brother braves in years past.

Could he but secure the scalp of this dangerous enemy of his tribe, great honors would be his, and perhaps an eagle-feather would be thrust into his head-dress at the next council by Nis-ti-u-na, the present acting or ranking chief, who would, he was confident, be confirmed by the civil chief, to take the place of the slain Kam-se la-um-ko. With this bright reward in prospect should he come off victor, the brave gathered all his strength for a desperate attempt to get the better of his white antagonist.

However, his attempt was an instant too late, for Single Eye, by a superhuman effort, sprung erect, at the same time jerking the Comanche brave to his feet, and before the Indian could comprehend the object of the old scout, the latter lunged forward, still grasping the right wrist of his foe, and throwing out his foot in such a manner as to strike the heel of the red-man, who fell backward, Single Eye throwing himself upon his foe.

The warrior fell heavily to earth, and the old scout hurled himself upon his victim with such force as to extort from the Comanche a heavy groan. At the same time, by a dexterous movement of his wrist, the old borderer caused the Indian to let go his hold. Then the bowie of Single Eye was buried to the hilt in the red-man's breast, who immediately began, in guttural tones, to chant his death-song, as his life-

blood welled out from the gaping wound. Victory was again on the side of right.

Single Eye at once sprung to assist Wolfe, not really knowing whether the latter was dead or alive, and, although panting for breath, severely wounded in his arm and side by knife-thrusts, which bled profusely, the old scout could not refrain from laughing, as he cried out, in utmost surprise and gratification:

"Dog-gone my ole heart! Leetle pard, ye're 'bout es bad off es ef yer was tied, han' an' hoof."

And truly, Wolfe was in a most peculiar fix, although not so perplexing, humiliating and dangerous as that of his antagonist; still, he was helpless, as far as doing his enemy any injury was concerned.

Probably it was very fortunate for Wolfe that, after stabbing his first brave in the back, although not mortally, as has been seen in a previous chapter, his second attempt at single combat was with a young Indian, who was probably, as was his white enemy, on his first war-path.

Both had fought with desperation, neither gaining the advantage, although both had received slight stabs or side cuts. Eventually they had fallen to the earth, clutched tightly together, and rolled over and over with great velocity into a thicket of thorn bushes, the long needles of which pierced their hands as they struggled, causing both to drop their knives, their flesh was so torn and tortured. They then sprung upward, and fell, clutching each other as they did so, Wolfe whirling the young brave half about by a dexterous movement, and falling upon him, the Indian being face downward. Quick as a flash the young man had grasped the wrists of his antagonist, and drawn them over the back of the brave, as he sprung astride, and held him down; and thus they were placed when Single Eye turned his attention to them, neither having it in his power to harm the other, as Wolfe, had he dared to fire his revolver, could not relinquish his hold on the wrist of the Indian to draw the weapon, without losing all the advantage that he had gained.

And thus they would have been forced to remain for some time, the end of such a struggle being difficult to determine, it being more like a wrestling match than a fight to the death. Observing the broken bushes, Single Eye stepped forward, discovered the knives, and threw them close to the strangely situated duelists, saying as he did so:

"Jump fer yer steel, leetle pard! Yer hes ther best o' ther young scarifier, fer his arms air stiff, I reckon, by this time. Gi'n him 'bout six inches in ther bestest biz part o' his 'nater-mony, an' we'll levant."

Wolfe sprung to his feet, but an instant after the brave was up also, and both regained their knives; then they stood, facing each other, with murder-flashing eyes—Wolfe, eager to end the conflict, braced up and confident, from the presence of the old scout; while the brave was somewhat filled with wonder, not unmixed with dread, as he beheld the terrible one-eyed enemy of his race, of whom he had heard since boyhood, and who was looked upon by the Indians as "Bad Medicine," against whom it was useless to combat.

Wolfe sprung forward, cutting the air with his bowie, in lightning-like movements, that no eye could hope to follow, for his blood was now up, and the wild din, now so audible on the plain, seemed ominous of coming danger, from which there might be no escape for Single Eye and himself.

The brave strove to ward off the flashing steel, but his arm was pierced in the effort to do so, cutting an artery; and, as the blood spurted in his face, Wolfe clove his heart in one terrible downward blow, that cut through his ribs with a sickening sound.

The brave threw up his arms, and fell forward upon his face a corpse, the blood smothered death-yell curdling in his throat.

The old scout quickly dug out the left eye of each warrior that he had slain, tore off the scalps of all, and with Wolfe at his side, both greatly fatigued and weakened from loss of blood—feeling more so now that the fight was over—and also suffering from being so long deprived of sleep, made their way to the horses, mounted and spurred out from the timber, gazing over the plain on the north side of the Clear Fork toward the east, an unbroken level now brightly illuminated by the moon, but not a speck could they discover upon its surface.

No horseman was in view.

Where were Chase and Stella?

"Dang my cats! Whar in thunderation hes Chase struck out fer wi' ther leetle gal? I never did see things work so crooked. Ef he's levanted west, 'stead o' east, bein' sort o' flusterated by seein' so much o' ther dang'd circus, all our trouble's throw'd away, fer they'll git gobbed, an' Chase'll be tortur'd an' scalped like thet soldjer on Percorn Bayou. Come on, Wolfe! We'll strike up-stream, cross, an' glide through ther timber, an' take a peep at ther big ronnadgery. Mebbe so Chase hes tried ter jine Bill an' ther boyees."

Wolfe was not only amazed at there being no sign nor trace of Chase, he having thought it

possible that the latter had fainted in the thick-
et and that he was not to be seen on the plain.
He felt discouraged and angry as well. But the
amazement he felt was doubled and also seemed
to be shared by Single Eye, when, after fording
the river, they heard the rumbling thunder and
the trembling tread of the buffalo in their stamp-
ede, the old scout having previously decided
and so stated to Wolfe that there was something
transpiring on the south plain that was not
down on their programme—the Comanche yells
and whoops at the discovery of the Apache war-
party having been heard and noted by him.

However, when our two friends gained a po-
sition from which they could, unobserved, view
from the undergrowth the plain in front of
them, they were completely nonplused at there
being none of the minute-men in sight, and also
to discover the stampeded animals of the Co-
manches returning, driven by a single Indian.

These discoveries were, however, as nothing,
when they saw the approaching Apache war-
party; and then, to cap the climax and render
them almost mad with frantic frenzy and deep
concern and anguish, down along the bank of
the river dashed Chase with Stella in his arms,
his horse flying in terror before a tremendous,
terrific, overwhelming buffalo stampede, by
which it seemed they were without doubt to be
crushed into the earth!

The flight of the Apaches before the bison, the
escape of Chase with Stella without the Coman-
ches making any attempt to capture them—all
these strange occurrences were so bewildering,
so unlooked for, and as far as the Indians were
concerned, puzzling in the extreme, and far be-
yond the average strange happenings that had
occurred in close rotation for the past two days
and nights.

"Come on, Wolfe!" said Single Eye, hastily.
"We-uns must save Chase an' ther leetle gal.
Both on 'em air more dead nor alive now, an'
ther reds air liable ter scoop 'em in 'most any
minit!"

Wolfe was himself weak from the loss of
blood, the young brave having cut him sev-
eral times, though not deeply; and the sleeves
and shoulders of Single Eye's shirt were sat-
urated with blood; but both dashed on the back
trail, forded the river, and in a very short space
of time were in their old position, gazing down-
stream with the most intense relief at the scene
that was unexpectedly revealed to them.

They saw the minute men all galloping east
toward home, the skirt of Stella's white dress
flying amid the throng, while Chase, supported
by two of Belknap Bill's boys, was plainly dis-
tinguished. Hugging the timber line they soon
turned a bend, and were lost to view.

"Dang my eye!" cried out the old scout, "ef
thet ain't a purty pictur'! Stella an' Chase air
hunk, an' ther 'Paches comin' in hes saved ther
hull fort crowd from losin' ha'r. Things is pan-
nin' out hunk all roun', 'ceptin' 'bout Mister
Stearns."

"Had we not better be getting away from
here, my old friend?" spoke up Wolfe, rather
nervously. "It seems to me that we are in a
terribly tight fix, as there are only two of us
against the whole Comanche war-party, saying
nothing about the Apaches, who will probably
run in and start a fresh circus after the buffalo
stampede has passed. I did not suppose that
there were as many bison in the world as we
saw just now."

"Thet's nothin'; only a grain o' snuff ter ther
hull box," asserted the old scout. "Es fur es
ther 'Paches air consarned, they'll keep on ther
skute toward Phantom Hill; fer they'll think
ther Good Spirit hev sent ther buffler 'tween
them an' ther Curmanches ter break up ther
fight. An' ther sight o' ther leetle gal an' Chase
on ahead in ther lead, ther reds this-a way not
scoopin' 'em in 'll make 'em a dang'd sight more
inclinated ter think thar's a heap o' big med-
sun scattered roun' not fur from hyer."

"But the Comanches will soon return to their
camp and discover that the guards have been
slain; then the superstitious part of the busi-
ness will fall through, and we'll find ourselves
in a more perilous position than ever."

"They'll not be in a hurry ter leave ther open,
fer they ain't dead sure yet that ther 'Paches
won't skute in on 'em. Howsomever, we-uns 'll
glide up ther leetle crick whar Mister Stearns
war see'd last, an' lay low awhile ter keep an
eye on ther reds, fer they mought take a notion
ter lunge down 'bout ther fort. Come on!
We-uns won't feel like meetin' Stella until we
hes foun' out something 'bout her dad. We'll
wash off ther bleel an' swaller a drink, fer I'm
feelin' 'bout es slimsy es a sick eel. Skip,
skute, old gall! Ye're gittin' lazy, an' yer didn't
make nary pint in ther last game."

With these words both started up the creek
toward the timber, directly toward the point at
which Stella had crossed the same in her head-
long flight from the Comanches.

Bathing their wounds, and satisfying their
thirst, they secreted their animals and climbed
a high tree, from which they soon heard the
uneathly howls of the Indians, they having
now discovered their dead.

"They'll be after us now," whispered Wolfe,
in a tone of apprehension.

"Nary!" contradicted Single Eye. "Coz

why? They'll see thet hit war this same ole
perrarer dog thet sent ther guard on ther whiz
ter kingdom come; an' knowin' I warn't with
ther boyees from ther Fort, an' not havin' gut a
peep et my purty pictur', they won't never sup-
pose thet I hed ary thing ter do wi' ther Fort
men, but they'll think I war sent by ther Good
Spirit ter call Child-o'-ther-Moon back hum.
Thet's 'bout ther hang o' hit.

"They hes hed me kerral'd so many times,
an' I gut away from 'em; an' they hev shot et
me quite es frequent an' offen, without sendin'
me ter grass, thet they hes begun ter think I'm
bad med'sun. I'm a-bettin' yer'll see 'em levant
west inside o' a hour."

And Single Eye was right; for, in less time
than he had predicted, the combined war-
parties, under Rolling Thunder and the Fox,
wound out from the timber, and in a long and
straggling line proceeded west, having in all
probability decided that the time was not propi-
tious for an attack on Fort Belknap.

The glance of the old scout was no longer
fastened upon the retreating Indians. Single
Eye swept the east plain, and the opposite side
of the creek, when he suddenly exclaimed:

"Wa al, dog-gone my ole 'Merican heart!"

"What's up now?" questioned his young
pard.

"Jumpin' Jerusalem! Jist gaze down thet-a-
way half a minit, leetle pard!"

Wolfe cast a glance in the direction indicated,
and discovered a spot, about a quarter of a
mile from the timber, which was literally cov-
ered with hundreds of turkey buzzards and
skulking coyotes; and, as the two gazed, there
was a scattering among the carrion birds and
wolves, the former, with dragging wings, that
indicated that they were gorged and unable
to fly, striding away, while the latter sneaked to
one side, their tails between their legs. Then,
in the space thus cleared, seemingly from out
the earth, a human head and shoulders pro-
jected, and a pair of arms wildly beat the air.

"I spits hit out ag'in!" said the astonished
scout. "Dog-gone my ole heart."

He then hastily descended the tree, followed
closely by Wolfe.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AND STILL ANOTHER.

SINGLE EYE and his young companion has-
tened through the timber, not a little startled
by what they had seen; for, even at their ele-
vated position in the tree, they could not per-
ceive that there was a "sink-hole" in the near
neighborhood of the man whom they had dis-
covered, apparently crawling out from a hole
in the plain.

As Single Eye and Wolfe approached the
mysterious human being who had appeared to
their vision in so strange a manner, they saw
that he was still in the pit, only his head,
shoulders and arms being above the level of the
plain.

And the appearance of that portion of the
strange being that was in view was such as to
cause them both to slacken their pace, and gaze
in silent wonder and sympathy. The head,
face and arms were smeared with earth, that
had adhered during perspiration, and had be-
come hardened in the fever that had followed.
The eyes were wild and blood-shot, and glared
with insane desperation and excruciating agony
in their depths. The hair was but a tangled,
twisted mass, seemingly having been torn by
maddened fingers, and then pressed compactly
to the skull, by contact with the earthly sides
of the chasm from which it now projected.

The lines of the face were drawn with suffer-
ing, dread and loathing, the lips were parched,
cracked and bleeding; while, snake-like, the
tongue of the miserable man darted at times
outward, lapping the crimson drops with avid-
ity, its swollen and discolored condition speak-
ing louder than words of the horrible agony
that was born of extreme thirst.

"Run back, Wolfe," cried out Single Eye,
hurriedly; "run back an' git a canteen o' wa-
ter! Ther man air a-dyin' o' thirst!"

This direction was given before either of
them had reached the poor sufferer, and Wolfe
obeyed with fast-flying feet. The old scout
rushed up to the strange object, and from be-
hind grasped him by the shoulders, and gently
lifted him out from the hole, seating him upon
the sward; but he fell back immediately, he
having been previously supported by the sides
of the excavation.

There was a fixed, immovable stare of agony
on the poor man's face, that told that the lubri-
cating fluid held in reserve for the optics had
been exhausted, dried up by heat, and torturing
thirst and mental agony!

As the reader will at once know, this man was
Henry Stearns, the long-imprisoned, long-suf-
fering victim of the "sink-hole," but as Single
Eye had never seen the man, he could not be
expected to know him—indeed, his nearest
friend could not have recognized him in the sad
plight in which he has been described—never-
theless, the old scout decided on the moment
that this was the missing man! Then, as Wolfe
hastened up, at this instant, with the canteen,
Single Eye inquired of him in a whisper:

"Leetle pard, air this hyer Mister Stearns?"

Hit 'pears ter me hit can't well be ary other hu-
man."

"Perhaps it is. It is some months since I last
saw him," said Wolfe, with feelings of deep
pity and wonder. "His own daughter, Stella,
would not recognize him in that plight and con-
dition, if he be really the man we take him to
be."

"I'm a-gamblin' hit air; an' ef he hain't bin
through wuss tortur' then a Curmanch' gin'rally
deals out, then I'm the mistookeneest ole perrarer-
dog in ther Lone Star State!"

As the old scout spoke, he poured a quantity
of water over the face and head and then into
the mouth of the sufferer, who then sprang
wildly to a sitting posture, and frantically
clutched the canteen.

"He can't drink 'nough ter hurt," said Single
Eye, as he relinquished his hold on the vessel.
"He's so shaky thet he'll spill ther beftiest part
o' hit."

With these words the old scout sprang, with
an ejaculation of surprise, toward the sink-hole,
his suspicions having been awakened by the
presence of the carrion-feeding birds and beasts;
and as he discovered the pit, and bending over
gazed into the same, he yelled out to Wolfe:

"Come this-a-way, leetle pard! Ef this hyer
ain't ther dog-gonedest, nastiest lay-out I've seen
since I war on Paint Creek, I'm a liar! Jumpin'
Jerusalem! Dang my ole heart! Ef that man
hain't hed all ther hell he ever orter, no marter
what he ever did in ther way o' breakin' Bible
laws, I'm ready ter swar thar can't be no squar'
thing 'bout hit! Fact air, hit's a wonder he kin
either breathe er kick. He's dug clean outen
this sink-hole, an' he hes parded, while he war
inter hit, wi' a Curmanch' brave an' a buffler
bull. He war runned inter this hole by reds, an'
thet's what saved his ha'r, though hit doesn't
look es though hit war wo'th savin' now. Thet
red must 'a' bin by hisself when he lunged down,
er ther t'others would 'a' saved him, an' dis-
covered this peculiar 'pearin' human. Dog-gone
hit! Thar's two good saddles down thar, but I
wouldn't go down a lariat arter 'em fer twic't
ther wo'th o' 'em. Whew! Wolfe, come on;
I'm pison sick. Hit's a good coyote trap no,
an' thar's a few what's bin crowded inter hit,
an' hes gut ter die a lingerin' death. Come!
We'll soak ther poor man in ther crick awhile,
an' then skute fer ther Fort, whar, ef I ain't
mistuck, we'll be mighty welcome."

Wolfe only just glanced into the loathsome
sink-hole, for the sight and smell were too much
for him. He clapped his hand over his nose,
and sprang away from the swollen, torn, and
festering bodies of the horses, buffalo, and
Comanche brave, among which a score of coy-
otes now fought, while gorged and red-jowled
buzzards strove to fly up to the plain, falling
back helpless, and blinking with stupidity from
their disgusting, ghoul-like feast.

Single Eye and Wolfe raised the suffering man
tenderly from the earth, and supporting him,
one walking on each side, they proceeded slowly
to the creek, the sight of which caused Stearns,
in his weak way, to make frantic efforts to
escape, and plunge into the cool and inviting
waters.

Leading him into the shallow water, the two
men gently and gradually dissolved the hard-
ened earth which clung to him, carefully re-
moving the stains, and then, with bunches of
wet moss, gave him a primitive shampooing,
after which he appeared more human-like, more
like himself, and was now readily recognized
by Wolfe. But the poor man himself did not
manifest any interest, show recognition, or
speak a word in answer to the youth's eager and
anxious questionings and explanations in regard
to the recent tragic occurrences, in connection
with the sufferer's own daughter Stella.

The two men were forced to keep on the alert,
and restrain Stearns from his insane eagerness
for water, or he would have drank enough to
cause death! Single Eye assisted in carrying
Stearns out on the bank, left Wolfe to watch
over him, and mounting Skip-lively, galloped to
the Clear Fork bottom timber, returning with
a strong horse that had escaped the notice of
the Indians. Then, binding some long, fresh
grass, torn from the bank of the creek, about
his nostrils, he proceeded to the "sink-hole,"
cast his lasso down over the horn of the saddle,
which had been removed from the dead horse
by Stearns, and hauled the same, with the
bridle attached, to the plain. The old scout
then proceeded to the creek, saddled and bridled
the stray steed he had been so fortunate as to
discover, and placed Stearns carefully upon it.

The trio then struck out to the eastward,
over the plain, and toward Fort Belknap; one
riding upon each side and supporting the suf-
ferer, whose insane mutterings were most dis-
tressing to hear, although the scout asserted
confidently that the poor man would be all
right, "arter a squar' sight at his darter, with
a leetle feed an' sleep thrown in."

Single Eye procured some dried beef and
cornpone from his malettes, which he gave to
Stearns, who d voured them with the avidity
and man er of a starved beast.

Night had again spread her sable mantle over
the Occident long before the three horsemen
reached Fort Belknap, as they were forced to

travel at a slow pace, on account of the sad condition of Stearns. The moon just peeped up in the east, as they broke timber near the very spot where Stella had fallen asleep, to be awakened by the headlong rush through the bushes on the opposite side of the river, of the battle-frenzied mustang of the Comanche chief, Rolling Thunder.

As this point was gained, the acute ears of Single Eye heard a groan of agony, which seemed to proceed from beyond the stream, and he jerked his horse to a halt suddenly, while he said:

"Hole on, leetle pard! Thar's somethin' wrong hyer-a-bouts. Thar's another sufferin' human layin' roun' loose, er I'll never pull trigger ag'in. Jist slide yer critter, hole ther nags, an' look arter Mister Stearns until I vester-gates things a leetle."

With these words the scout dashed through the narrow belt of timber, and waded the stream at a shallow point. Then he stood for a moment, listening in silence most intently.

Once more the groan of suffering broke upon the night air, and locating the sound this time, Single Eye sprang through the undergrowth, when, to his utmost astonishment and exceeding great relief, he discovered the outstretched form of John Fox, his head resting upon the exposed root of a large tree. Lifting the youth in his arms, he bore him out from the bushes, waded the river, and advanced to the side of the amazed Wolfe, where he thus announced himself:

"Dog-gone my ole heart, boyee! I hes foun' yer pard, an' I'm a snake-eatin' Piute ef he hain't laid cluss by ther Fort, bad hurted, since yesterday forenoon. Hits a mystery how he come in sich a fix, but we-uns'll find out, I reckon, when he gits roun' ter biz ag'in."

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Wolfe. "I'm ashamed to confess that I had entirely forgotten the poor fellow, and the fact that he had started from the Fort ahead of the minute-men, and did not put in an appearance. Who could have wounded him? Is he seriously hurt, do you think?"

"He's stabbed in the shoulder, an' he 'pears ter gut a hefty whack on ther head by fallin' ag'in' a big root. I'm a-bettin' heavy ther Rollin' Thunder laid fer him, st'uck him, tuck his hoss, an' skuted up ther river, jist in time ter turn ther stompede. But how ther cuss gut clean down this-a-way air too much fer this hyer ole perrarer-dog. Ya-as, he'll glide through, hunk, wi' ease. I reckon, we-uns better start a hoss-pittle. But, come on—I'll tote Fox. He doesn't weigh more'n three quarters o' a mejum sized buck."

So saying, Single Eye placed Fox across the shoulders of his horse, mounted, and taking the youth tenderly in his arms, proceeded slowly on; Stearns, all the while, gazing vacantly ahead, and taking no notice of either the words or movements of his conductors.

But a few yards had the little party placed between them and the timber, when a prolonged and joyous yell reached them from the bluff over the spring; and, before the open level was half crossed, the bluff was lined with women. The men of the town, Belknap Bill at their head, rushed down the steep trail with cries of relief and pleasure; all, however, being filled with wonder, when they discovered that Single Eye held an apparently dead man in his arms, while he and Wolfe supported another on a horse.

"Dog-gone yer, Bill! How-de?" called out Single Eye. "I wish't ther nex' time yer goes on ther war-path, yer would fotch in yer wounded yerself, an' not leave 'em fer me an' Skip ter diskiver an' tote. How is Chase an' Stella? Hope ther leetle gal ain't a-goin' ter fly back up hum an' leave we-uns, arter all our cuttin' an' shootin' biz!"

The words of the old scout were unheeded, however, perhaps unheard; for glad and joyous shouts now rent the air from the boys of Belknap, and the women on the bluff, surmising that the lost were found, rushed back and forth wildly, clasping each other in their arms in their exceeding joy, as they had when their own husbands returned with Stella.

Belknap Bill took Fox in his arms and strode up the trail, some of the women running ahead to warn the man of many professions and numerous businesses that more sick and wounded were coming to tax his kindness and command his skill.

Marm Dean put in her bulky appearance and her tongue as well, as the party reached the grand combination—mercantile, postal, surgical and medicinal—establishment; but she held a huge key in her hand, and ever and anon cast frequent and suspicious glances back toward her "ho-t'l."

"I wish't, Bill, yer'd put a guard 'round my ranch; fer though I hes Stellar kerral'd, an' hes gut ther key, 'sides her bein' nigh dead, I'm orful skittish, an' keeps a imaginin' she's levanted an' on ther fly ag'in. Ef she does skute arter her dad ag'in, I shell go plum crazy, I reckon. I'm dead sure I'll take my mule ther nex' time, an' strike out arter her myself."

Alth'ugh Marm Dean would have undoubtedly died in a very short space of time, if she had been gagged, or in any way prevented from

talking, she seldom took notice of anything that was said by others, unless some very important news were communicated, or her own assertions were questioned; and in her present state of excitement on account of the rescue and return of Stella, she being considered the most important person in the burg, from having the "Angel of the Fort" in her care and custody—this state of mind prevented her from listening to the weak-voiced woman who cried out at the "ho-t'l" door that Mr. Stearns had been found.

Puffing and blowing like a porpoise, from her worried state, and violent, hasty waddle to the post-office, she demanded, as she saw Belknap Bill with Fox in his arms:

"Who yer gut now, Bill? Somebuddy else gut them dang'd p'ison arrers inter 'em? Ef they hes, I'll stop inside until they jumps inter ther Brazos, fer I do declar' I never shall git cl'ar o' thet sight es long es I live!"

At this moment she caught sight of Stearns, and came near falling to the ground in her spasmodic effort to pronounce a dozen words in one, she choking violently with her excitement, great joy, and the unusual exertion required to articulate. At last her tongue got around to business.

"Bless my soul an' body ef thet ain't Mister Stearns! Wa-al, I'm jist a good notion ter yell right out, an' I would ef I c'd 'spress my feelins thet-a-way. He looks es though he'd bin dragged 'tween ther pickets o' a kerral, from gate roun' ter gate ag'in, er shot outen a cannon through a mesquite chap'rell. Stellar'll come roun' O. K. now, I'll bet my back ha'r. Fotch Mister Stearns roun' ter his own room, Bill! Stellar's a-sleepin', an' everythin' seems like it mought pan out right side up wi' care all roun'. Bless my soul, I do feel awful skittish!"

CHAPTER XXVIII. AS IT SHOULD BE.

GENTLE reader, our tale draws near to an end. There are only a few explanations to be made, in regard to those who were called upon to suffer, through wounds and illness, all consequent upon the foolish and inexcusable dash after a straggler from the herd of buffalo, by Henry Stearns, much against the protestations of his more experienced companions, the minute-men of Young county, Texas; a noted organization of border-born heroes at the time of which we write.

Stella Stearns and Charles Chase, both of them more dead than alive, were safely conveyed to Fort Belknap, and attended with care; the former by Marm Dean, who was ever watchful of her charge until Stella recovered her senses and was informed of her father's sad experiences and rescue—Marm Dean fearing a second mysterious disappearance.

Fox, Wolfe and Chase, under the care of the physician, and the nursing of volunteers from among the kind-hearted women of the burg, recovered their strength, and in due time their wounds were healed.

Stearns, the invalid, greatly to the surprise of all, no sooner recovered his reason, after a run of brain fever, from which Fox and Chase also suffered, than he became more and more fleshy each day, grew younger in appearance, and enjoyed better health than he had been blessed with since boyhood. This was produced, so Single Eye asserted, "from his systematics bein' turned plum inside out at ther sink-hole, which made a new man of him; though, ef he wore 'em out ag'in, he'd have ter go under, es he c'd't use t'other side no more."

It was a happy day with the citizens of Fort Belknap, when Stella, with joyous laugh, and rosy cheeks, tripped ahead of Chase, down the trail, and over the "open" to the timber, to show him the spot where she fell asleep, and was awakened by the horse of the wounded chief.

When she explained this to Belknap Bill, and also the fact that she had dressed the warrior's wounds, and left him food and brandy, the leader of the minute-men no longer looked upon the appearance of Rolling Thunder, with the stamped herd of Comanche mustangs, as a mystery; and they all knew that this humane act of the "Angel of the Fort" had saved the band from being massacred, when the buffaloes dashed between the Comanches and the Apaches. It was then, no doubt, that the chief revealed the fact to his braves, that the white maiden had been sent by the Good Spirit to save his life. That every Comanche, from the chief down, considered Stella "Big Medicine," none could doubt.

In less than one month from the day on which they were brought into Fort Belknap, Mr. Stearns, Stella, Chase, Wolfe and Fox were well and happy—especially the latter, far beyond the ordinary lot of mortals in this world of ours, were Charles and Stella.

Three months from the eventful day, which so strangely prevented from marking the date of a most terrific battle between the Apaches and Comanches, Charles Chase and Stella Stearns were united in the bonds of holy matrimony, the ceremony being performed beneath the cool, green arches of the bottom timber on the upper Rio Brazos, and upon the self same

spot where the fair girl had worried herself to sleep, as she dwelt on the imaginary dangers that might encompass her father—dangers which were indeed nothing in comparison to what really transpired.

Henry Stearns, no longer an invalid, presided at the bridal feast, which was spread beneath the trees, and enjoyed by every man, woman and child at Fort Belknap. Stearns donated a considerable sum of money to each of the women whose husbands met such a fearful end, following their being poisoned by the arrows of the Comanches. Each of the minute-men received a new and elegant rifle, a brace of Colt's army revolvers, and a bowie knife, with accompanying belts and pouches, all being richly ornamented, and each having a silver presentation plate, upon which was engraved the name of the recipient, and also the following:

PRESENTED TO

BY STELLA CHASE,

(nee Stearns),

THE "ANGEL OF THE FORT,"

Alias "CHILD-OF-THE-MOON."

A beautiful residence was erected on the outskirts of the town, amid the oaks, and surrounded by a high oak picket fence, pierced for rifles.

In this mansion, which, like its mistress, was the pride of the Fort, were often gathered almost the entire population of Belknap, to feast, and dance, and sing. Belknap Bill was made to accept three fine horses, as Fox and Stella had lost two of his—the bay and the black having been taken by the Indians.

Fox and Wolfe purchased land near Pecan Bayou, below the scene of Single Eye's energetic "interview" with the Comanche spies, and engaged in stock raising.

Henry Stearns, in the beginning of the next winter season, visited San Antonio, where he purchased a large building site, and there erected a mansion for his daughter and son-in-law; they having expressed a wish to pass the cold and wet months in the gay and attractive Alamo City.

Single Eye was never happier than with his "leetle pards," Chase, Fox and Wolfe. With them, accompanied also by Mr. Stearns and Belknap Bill, he went on a buffalo-hunt—Stearns first refusing, most decidedly and emphatically to join them, unless the old scout promised solemnly that they would not go within five miles of the "sink-hole."

When he detailed, to eager ears, the loathsome horrors and mental torture he had endured, and also the fact that an Indian had plunged into the pit, in the same manner as he had done, and that he killed him, his hearers were amazed, and wondered that he had survived it all.

Stella, when informed by her father that she had galloped over a corner of the pit in which he crouched, felt thankful that she had been ignorant of the fact, as she would undoubtedly have doomed him to death, by her halt and outcries.

Stella explained to her friends, that she recovered from a swoon, after witnessing the horrible duel between the Comanche braves, and found that another war-party had, meanwhile, joined the one that had taken her captive; there being then in the camp at least twice the number of warriors that there had been previously, and many of them, as she judged from their ornaments, were noted braves; that they advanced, with every show of respect to where she lay, examining the snake and turtle which she had foolishly allowed, when a child, to be pricked into her arms. These, she knew, had for some reason, greatly impressed the red-men.

"An' I'm a-bettin'," said Single Eye, impressively, "thet ef yer hedn't hed them things on yer arm yer'd 'a' bin tortur'd dead sure an' sartin'; fact air, I know yer would!"

And so the foolish whim of her childhood had saved her life.

Marm Dean gave up the hotel business, to accept the position of housekeeper to Stella; her tongue retaining its remarkable vigor, and nimbleness to relate over and over, a thousand times, the strange and eventful occurrences which transpired in such a short time, and which we have thought might perhaps serve to interest for a few idle hours, those who feel an interest in learning somewhat of the actual happenings, and of the peculiar and savage people of the south-west border, as well as others, of more intelligence, who are, at times, launched from so-called civilization among them.

THE END.

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